[00:00:00] Neil Waller: I actually think you're going to end up in this world of a barbell. So on the one hand we're going to have tons of AI generated content, tons of stuff more personalized to your unique tastes. On the inversal, I think it's also going to cause a humans and culture and people running back to the other end of the barbell.

[00:00:21] Matt Britton: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the sh consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now and how you can keep up. Welcome to the Speed of Culture.

Up today on the Speed of Culture podcast, we're thrilled to welcome Neil Waller, co founder and CEO of the Whaler Group. Neil Co founded Whaler in 2016 long before the creator economy had become the cultural and commercial force it is today. Whaler has since grown from an influencer marketing agency into a six company creator ecosystem and today Neil's helping creators turn influence into lasting business businesses while preparing well for a creator led future across media and culture and commerce. Neil, it's so great to see you today. I've been looking forward to this.

[00:01:12] Neil Waller: Thanks Matt very much. Looking forward to chatting as well.

[00:01:14] Matt Britton: Great. So way back in 2016 when you were getting going with the origins of your business, so many brands were looking at creators as more of like an experimental media channel. What did you see then that kind of gave you conviction to really dive into this area?

[00:01:30] Neil Waller: You know what, I don't even think back then they were thinking of creators as an experimental media channel. I remember back then still being in meetings and brands would be like why should I be on Instagram? That's how quickly everything has evolved. And it's really as much as I'm one passionately pushing for the creator economy to continue to grow and continue to have more impact and there'd be bigger opportunities for it. I then just think back to that 10 years ago and like wow, it's come a long way in 10 years. To answer your question, I think the kernel of truth for us was we had our own D2C brands on Shopify, did pretty well with them and we're really. It was through collaborating with influencers and creators that we were both creating great content that we were using ourselves using, organically using and paid.

[00:02:18] Matt Britton: How did you know what products to sell?

[00:02:20] Neil Waller: So my co founder James and I love co founded everything with. We were college dropouts. The Whaler was our ninth business. So before that we tried lots of different things. Trial and error and experimentation and listening to the market and saying, we are no crystal ball readers. We just try and read the market and move and learn as we go along.

[00:02:44] Matt Britton: Well, you're saying you were selling products, so you said you had your own Shopify platform. You're actually selling physical problems. What types of products and how did you know those are the right ones to bet on?

[00:02:53] Neil Waller: Even again, I'm going to go to a bit of trial and error. I mean, the beauty of Shopify and the Internet was that you could spin things up pretty quickly and test them and get reaction to things. We had a watch brand and it had interchangeable straps. It was like a 100 to $150 price point. It was something people would buy for themselves, people would buy as gifts. You could market it online. The beauty of the interchangeable straps was we had repeat customers. So normally you sell a watch and that's it. When will they buy another watch? We were able to sell to a customer and then bring out new straps and have them come and buy new straps and turn it into kind of a fashion accessory as much as a kind of timepiece. Luck in timing in everything. We were one of the early advertisers on Instagram. We actually won Shopify's build a business competition with that brand. So in 2015, we had the top selling fashion and apparel brand worldwide on Shopify. You know, if you'd started it five years earlier, it might have been too early. If you'd started five years later, the market was more saturated. So luck and timing goes into all these things a little. But we're also pretty good at experimenting on things, learning, and then fast following into things that work. And I think honestly, that's more of the story of how we got conviction in things and tried things and worked than any moment of genius where we bet big and we're right. Because I think most of the time you do that and you're wrong both in your right.

[00:04:16] Matt Britton: It's interesting. I think a key takeaway is also kind of like eating your own dog food, right? Like, so many people stand on stage and they throw out these buzzwords that they're going to be supposedly helping brands sell product. Right. Because that's what we're in the business of doing in the ad agency world is helping brands, but they've never sold their own products. And here you are basically finding products to sell, proving a model by partnering with creators and actually being able to stand up there in pitches or on stage and saying, we're doing it it's working. And it can work for you, too.

[00:04:47] Neil Waller: It's funny because as the journey of Whaler and became the Whaler Group went on, that story got told less. But in those early days, that was the thing that got people's attention because it's like, how have you built a D2C brand to have such growth? And of course, the thing is, like, we knew nothing about the marketing and advertising world. The first one went to Cannes, la, and I never knew what it was. I'd never heard of WPP or Publicist or Omnicom or ipg. These were foreign concepts for me. Or what we had learned was, if you've got a physical product or any product or service to sell, if you can't get that in front of audiences and convince them to buy you, then you're running a charity or a hobby. So, unbeknownst to ourselves, entered into the marketing and advertising world without having a clue that that was a thing. And so, yes, in those early days, that was the thing that got us all the meetings because people were like, oh, I want to hear how they're doing and how they've been disrupted. Three or four years in, that story stopped being told because Influencer Marketing

becoming the creator economy, Whaler becoming Whaler Group, in the group of everything, that became the success. But at the start, that was the thing that got us in the door.

[00:05:52] Matt Britton: So how did you refine your approach from selling products with creators to helping brands do the same? What went into productizing that offering and really gaining conviction on what the business was going to ultimately become in the early days?

[00:06:07] Neil Waller: It's a great question. I don't want this to be too boring an answer, but it's the honest answer again. It's like iterative improvement. James, my co founder, has Kaizen tattooed on him.

[00:06:16] Matt Britton: So you would go in front of a brand and you'd be like, well, that wasn't the right pitch. Like, that didn't land. They didn't understand it. And how did you even get in front of the brand? Because there's a lot of people who listen to podcast that want to start and get into the advertising world, et cetera, like yourselves, when you don't really have that internal knowledge. What were you doing? Were you just knocking down doors? How'd you get in front of brands? And you remember, like, one of the first instances, we're like, wow, I can't believe we actually won that business.

[00:06:42] Neil Waller: Lot. So look, dogged determination. You don't hear no's, you just keep going.

[00:06:47] Matt Britton: Every no gets you closer to yes, right?

[00:06:49] Neil Waller: Yeah. And it's kind of like if you knew it was going to take 26 nos to get to a yes, how good would you feel about no number 20? That you're that much closer. You just don't know how many nos it's going to be. I think people would also say in those early days, like, how many clones of you are there, Neil? Because you're everywhere and you kind of have to be as well. I'm fortunate not to have to do that quite so much anymore. And I think you use the word, and I love this word for it, like naivety. You have to be willing to be naive and go for it and just try and you listen and learn and you adapt. And look, I want to be clear, it sounds like we're speaking the same language a lot. I want to be clear, like I'm no oracle. This is an opinion of one. And there are other ways that people can succeed where it's the polar opposite of the path that I took. I personally have this thing where I think business plans are f*cking dangerous because you're like, oh, well, it says on page six.

[00:07:42] Matt Britton: Especially here in 2026, especially where we are right now.

[00:07:47] Neil Waller: Because you can't say it says this on page six. No, take what you heard in market and learn and adapt. You have to be careful not to just listen to everything and then stand for nothing and not go off.

[00:07:58] Matt Britton: Right. Because then you're a ping pong ball bouncing around without vision. Right.

[00:08:01] Neil Waller: So the shitty part of what I'm talking about is it's very difficult to like find this right path through. But generally speaking, like, listen to the market, adapt, see what works. I don't think it's any different from like a comedian going and do testing standup, like what works? Oh, I'll lean into that more. That message landed in that way. And I want to be clear amongst all this, IT process is also not a long term business plan, but an ambition and aspiration of where to take things. We knew we were rooted in creators being a creative workforce, not just a media channel. Their insights, their intelligence. As consumers of brands, we knew our job was to elevate where it was and be a thought leader. So everything also ladders up to a bigger picture. But honestly, it's one step at a time.

[00:08:52] Matt Britton: Yeah. And I imagine along the way you probably ran into, and probably still run into this notion that brands, especially larger companies, don't want to give up control, but the best creators want that control. They want to be able to Express themselves. How have you dealt with that friction over time?

[00:09:08] Neil Waller: The way I thought about it as well was for a long time, the kind of buzzword was authenticity. And I kind of went out on a tirade and said, look, it's about respect more than authenticity, because a collaboration between two parties can be an authentic right collaboration. But if there's no respect and they're not respecting each other, then one dominates and ruins it. And I don't think it's about a complete cessation of control. I think it's about finding mutual respect where the reason you want to work with that creator and their team and their audience is because of what they present as a community and as a kind of tastemaker and a Sherpa to that audience in that community. But they also have to respect what the brand stands for and what the brand's looking for. And I think it's like it's focusing on truly setting up collaborations and relationships of respect. That's where you then land in that right place. So I actually don't agree that it's about a cessation of total control. It's about that correct middle ground partnership.

[00:10:08] Matt Britton: Absolutely. And over time, of course, creators did become bigger and your original thesis started to prove out. Where did your typical client engagement start to sort of formulate over time? Where once the business captured scale, I'm sure, obviously every engagement looks a little bit different. But what are the things that even today Whaler is doing for its clients in the creator space?

[00:10:32] Neil Waller: I just think it's gone from being an afterthought. We've got some leftover budget that we're going to play here. We're planning on launching something, announcing something, rebranding something. Creators are at the table as the strategy from day one. And also not just as a marketing tool, but again, as a creative collaborator, as a resource into insights into the market, be it the creators themselves or their audiences. And now, I don't know if you saw the news about Markiplier and taking. Was it like a 7 or 9% share

ownership in GoPro or Marques Brownlee took a share in that company that does like camera cases and stuff about a ridge, I think it was. So I just think like these worlds are just coming together in a more interesting way where creators are seeing, you know, again, the tip of the spear, are seen as media and entertainment companies. And so the thought of collaboration, and I don't want to overplay it, it's not at this scale, but it's like how a Mattel might partner with whoever made Barbie and stuff like that, like, it's just a higher level of collaboration and a deeper level. And that's an exciting opportunity for where the industry is going.

[00:11:42] Matt Britton: We'll be right back with the Speed of Culture after a few words from our sponsors. And if you think about it, and we first start to see this with traditional celebrities, whether it was Dr. Dre and beats Headphones or all the businesses that the Kardashians have gotten behind, it was sort of like once the ability to manufacture products became commoditized out of China, the distribution became ultimately the differentiator, the ability to have reach and an audience that cares about you. And I think over time, as the iPhone proliferated into the main media consumption device amongst Gen Z and younger consumers, that same notion of a list celebrities started to kind of transcend into creators. And today, so many of the best brands in B2C and I think increasingly in B2B are going to have that sort of partnership that you first created way back when, 10 years ago, where you have people that have distribution, that have an audience that cares. And again, everything is becoming increasingly easy to make. Like I can make a toothbrush, you can make a toothbrush. In the past, that just wasn't the case. What's going to make our toothbrushes different? Well, it's going to be the brand. And what makes the brand in a world where people aren't watching TV the same way they used to, it's going to be who you partner with, who's the voice behind the brand. And I think that's where creators are really just getting started. I believe in terms of becoming the new brand.

[00:12:58] Neil Waller: The build on that as well. And it's like what makes a great product company succeed to your toothbrush analogy, but also what makes a great creative business succeed. There's also just operational rigor and excellence of execution. And that is still the difference maker. And so I think you've got to have both. The interesting thing there, as a slight segue, is what gives me a lot of confidence and excitement about this next wave of these creators becoming even bigger businesses is the operational expertise and rigor that's coming to work for creators and their teams are joining their teams and the ecosystems that are partnering around them. That's really professional and really robust, because these are real, sizable companies that have even bigger opportunities. And yes, you have to have a connection with the community and audience, you have to have creative excellence. But if you have shitty operational rigor, it's going to fall apart at some stage all the time. And so I still think ideas are cheap, operational execution of great ideas, that's kind of a big difference maker.

[00:14:06] Matt Britton: And how have you been able to do that at scale as a business as growing? How many employees do you have right now at the company?

[00:14:12] Neil Waller: Well, pre the sale of the agency extension, we were about 500. We're now about 300.

[00:14:18] Matt Britton: Gotcha. So when you have a business between 3 and 500 people, executing at a high level at scale is not easy. What have been some of your, I guess, tried and true methods to harness and grow and retain great talent?

[00:14:34] Neil Waller: We still improve at this all of the time. I'd say a few things I've learned along the way. The time and effort of leaders to convey the kind of principles that you're trying to build as a company and the direction you're going in. It's kind of that notion of, like, you know, if anyone veers off course at first, if you veer off course by 1%, it doesn't look like very much. And then you look a year later and it's like, oh, God, you've gone far.

[00:14:58] Matt Britton: Right. It's like death by a thousand cuts, so to speak.

[00:15:00] Neil Waller: Death by a thousand cuts. So making it so that anyone can make a decision in the business and that decision has got more chance of being aligned with where the business is trying to go than not through that communication layer is really important. Because the second build on that is that to succeed, you need to be able to delegate a lot of autonomy and authority to make decisions quickly and build in smaller teams. That doesn't work if, like, it would be death by a thousand cuts and things were going off. And again, we're by no means experts improving all of the time. But that effort of explaining where we're going, what are the principles? We have a thing here called the 10 Philosophies that make us Whaler that gives people one of them, for example, is fast but no shortcuts. And so it's that people can make decisions knowing what the rubric of where you're trying to get in the way you're trying to operate as business that then allows that greater autonomy to go. And then you give that autonomy so you can be quick at a market and do things. One of them is poop emoji. So we have a slack channel, we have a poop emoji channel where people share the mistakes. Like we expect to make mistakes. We're not pushing the boundary. If we're not willing to do them, we'll celebrate them. Don't make the same mistake two or three times, but we do it so everyone can learn from everyone else's mistakes. That's also not fear of failure. And I think there's some founder mentality that gets built in, that helps take risks and still grow and push the boundaries on things.

[00:16:26] Matt Britton: And of course speaking of pushing boundaries, right now everybody is focused on pushing new boundaries via AI and obviously AI is already having a massive impact on the creator economy. Just curious from where you sit, how is AI going to mold the feeds, the mobile social feeds of consumers around the world in the years to come?

[00:16:46] Neil Waller: So I think two parts of the answer. One part like for creative businesses that are built more lead than traditional companies, right, because they've all generally been bootstrapped. There hasn't been a ton of like funding resources. And also they're just built in that more modern day era. They are more able to lean into AI tools to amplify every part of their

operation and what they do, whereby a small team of 1, 2, 3, 4, 10 people, 12 people can now operate like a much bigger business and a much bigger team. And so it's going to enable creators to compete with larger production entities at a fraction of the budget and it's going to just allow them to grow and do more. And that's super exciting. You then have the question on what's it going to do to the social feed and consumers and content consumption. I mean obviously it's going to balloon the amount that is made. I actually think you're going to end up in this world of a barbell. So on the one hand we're going to have tons of AI generated content, tons of stuff more personalized to your unique tastes and it will be even less of a monoculture than we already have and it will be lots and I think people grammar to. And by the way, you know, I know people call it AI slop. It's going to get better and there's going to be great stuff in that on the inversal. I think it's also going to cause a humans and culture and people running back to the other end of the barbell which is going to be taste made cultural decisions where someone is your tastemaker and is pointing out what to watch and what's interesting and actually more monoculture in those ways. And I think it's a great time to be a trusted brand or a trusted creator where people go. We launched Lyrical Lemonade TV with a big creator called Cole Bennett and I think it was a demand where it's like, I want to know what Cole and his team think is cool and interesting, and I want them to taste make for me. Where I think it's going to be interesting is the middle is probably going to be hard to survive in.

[00:18:50] Matt Britton: I think that's the case for every brand.

[00:18:51] Neil Waller: And probably actually is the trend in everything in all types of businesses. Like, the middle becomes a hard ground.

[00:18:57] Matt Britton: 100% agree. So you'd mentioned this earlier, but earlier this year, Accenture agreed to acquire a part of the business, but you didn't go along with the acquisition. We'd just love to hear about what the impetus was behind that transaction, how it impacts you and the business moving forward.

[00:19:12] Neil Waller: So our agency, business, Whaler, so that was the advertising agency component that works with brands and then does all the kind of strategy and collaboration with creators for their campaigns. That was the first business we started, hugely successful business. And we worked with Accenture on a few clients and then just through natural working and collaborating, they essentially asked, would you be open to us acquiring the business? And then we just went on that exploratory journey together. We never ran a big process. It was kind of a one of one conversation with them of, hey, is there a good fit here? Is this one plus one equals three is the team that runs that business? We had two fantastic leaders of that business, Joe and Emma, they were co CEOs. One of them, Joe, was in New York, Emma was in London. They'd been with the business eight years, they'd been running it for three. And them and the team got really excited about the prospect of like growing with Accenture and what that could bring to the table. And eventually the deal terms and the opportunity was sufficient enough to say, okay, let's do this, why not? And I think that business

is going to have huge growth potential inside Accenture, which is exciting. Then we, I mean, I was just on a call this morning with the Accenture team with and Didi the CEO, talking about future collaboration between Whaler Group and Accenture going forward. So there's kind of a collaborative opportunity there. It also then for us is a ton of capital, some that we've taken off the table and then plenty that we've left in the business to kind of invest. Really, whats remains in the business is our companies, where the creators are the stakeholders. So the advertising agency, the brands were the stakeholders. Back to our origins and our belief of where our value is in the ecosystem that build with creators and help them build big companies. And so we've now got the capital and the firepower do that. And even more relationships with brands through the partnership with Accenture as well.

[00:21:07] Matt Britton: Yeah. Which is a great business. And obviously their Accenture song unit has tons of deeper in relationships, which I'm sure can unlock a lot of opportunities. So it's great. Congratulations on that. I know firsthand that's aren't easy process. Super stressful to go through lots of twists and turns. So congrats on getting across the finish line.

[00:21:24] Neil Waller: Thank you very much.

[00:21:25] Matt Britton: So, as we wrap up here, Neil, I'd love to hear from you as you look back on your career journey. And you've already talked about some of these things in terms of just, you know, the naivete of the entrepreneurial journey. And every no gets you closer to yes. And I think those are such important lessons for people to understand in a world where I think people are increasingly impatient. They want that success now, but it doesn't come as easily. But when you look at the life cycle of building your business over the last 10 years, what were some of the other things you think you did right, perhaps operationally, how you position the business that put you in the position that you're in today?

[00:21:58] Neil Waller: That is a great question, I think. And it's still a value that we sort of hold true today. We always took the approach of how do we behave like a larger company. So I remember we were one of the first companies in our space to go to Cannes Lions and then we took a physical space in Cannes Lions before anyone had really heard of the crayer economy. Like, where do you need to show up so that the rest of the industry takes note? And it's all very well and good on knocking on people's doors and saying, hey, we're a disruptive new thing. That's interesting and you should be paying attention to, but people need to work with stuff that feels safe, that feels like it's going to be around, that feels like it has some scale, that feels like it behaves like things that they are used to seeing and hearing and in ways they are used to seeing. And you know, I saw fellow founders and again I want to be clear, like there's different ways of doing it. I'm by no means the only way to get things right, but I saw in fellow found is like this concept, like we just disruptors. F*ck the system. You guys do it all wrong. And I was like, no, be more respectful. Like be additive. Like there are things to learn from there and there are ways of working that if you don't adapt to work with, you won't be able to work in bigger ways with brands. And so it's finding that balance. And I think we always worked out how to be

respectful, how to play bigger, how to play for the long term. And I think that really, like, paved a way of difference. It also means that we were having to make investments in, like, marketing and showing up in places that were, I think, bigger checks than other people would have written in things because it was like a compounding effect over years that that benefit came. But we basically said, how would you behave if you were a bigger company?

[00:23:45] Matt Britton: There's a little bit of fake it till you make it right. Especially in the early days.

[00:23:50] Neil Waller: Yeah. The key there, though is like, don't trade on today, trade on next week, but don't trade on next year because you're also only as good as your word. And if you get, like, known for, like, not living up and not like succeeding, by the way, to be clear, we made mistakes a lot. People do. But then we made it right with people and we didn't oversell to a level where they're like, you never have. You were just lying. And a lot of that happens as well. So, like, trade on tomorrow. For sure. There's fake it till you make it, but don't fake it too far out. I always loved the thing that Zuck, you know, there's that story, like the Facebook campus at Palo Alto. It was the old Sun Microsystems campus, and on the back of the Facebook sign was Sun Microsystems sign still. So that he was like, don't think that you're so successful that you're in this campus that you can't fail because the company that used to be in this campus no longer exists. So I think the other thing is, like, we were always in a state of we don't know what we're doing. We could fail. Like, never get, like, the difference between confidence and arrogance is a very thin line. But, like, don't get complacent, don't get arrogant, don't over step, like, know that this can go away and fail. Like, I think we also, you know, we had your own journey to go on there. But getting that right as well is something to watch out for.

[00:25:06] Matt Britton: I love that. So, Neil, to wrap up here, and it's been such a great discussion. We always ask our guests that there's a saying or mantra that's helped sort of encapsulate the professional journey. So what comes to mind for you?

[00:25:17] Neil Waller: It's one of our ten philosophies. Mountains look like molehills in the rear view mirror. So we're constantly going through things. We're like, how the hell are we going to get past this? This seems insurmountable. And you look back and you're like, okay, it was tough, but it was okay. And it just, the more you go through, it equips you to do more. And so the whole team know mountains look like molehills in the rearview mirror.

[00:25:39] Matt Britton: That's amazing. And it's so true. It's like when you first get something in front of you, you do even a little bit of imposter syndrome sometimes, right? Who am I to do this? But afterwards, it all kind of makes sense. So I think that's great advice. There's so many great nuggets here on the podcast for our listeners today. So again, congrats on your success and your recent transaction and wishing you nothing but further heights in the years to come. So thanks so much for taking the time Neil.

[00:26:03] Neil Waller: Thanks Matt. Enjoyed chatting.

[00:26:04] Matt Britton: Thank you. On behalf of Suzy and Adweek team, thanks again to Neil Waller, co founder and co CEO of Whaler Group, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review the Speed of Culture Podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time. See you soon everyone. Bye bye.

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