

In Proximity

Season 3 Episode 16

Prox Gems: Industry Tips

Final Transcript

Paola Mardo: Do you still feel like a T-shirt has power today?

Jeff Staple: 100,000 percent. It's a really powerful medium.

James Swoope: I feel like people forget that they are artists. There's always something that can be done on whatever level you at.

Azie Tesfai: It's that need of us feeling like we have to be so ready.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Versus, like, it's okay if we jump in and we make mistakes.

Paola Mardo: Yup.

[00:19 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo and today is another edition of our Prox Gems. It's the new year—happy New Year—and we thought, hey, as folks are getting ready for the new year and whatever cool projects and things you have going on, why not share some industry tips from this past season? We had some really cool filmmakers, artists, and executives come on board to share some insights from sort of the business side of the entertainment industry.

So take notes—you're going to want to! Get ready for the new year with these industry tips. Enjoy!

[1:00 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I feel like a lot of people who listen to this podcast are creatives who are passionate about something. But being in the entertainment industry or media or whatever, you do have to kind of add a little business to that if you want to do that art as your career. You have to kind of meld your passion with business. What was it like to transition from, like, something you're just passionate about, which was art, design, printing on a shirt, but then, oh, snap, it's a business now?

Jeff Staple: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: What was the early days like?

Jeff Staple: I did not learn that lesson for at least another five years. I—I wasn't operating it like a business for better or for worse. And I say that because I think it was good that I had that naivete to just do it. You know, maybe if I overanalyzed, like, the business plan or the P&L, I would've scared myself out of it. So there was a certain, just—again, like obliviousness of just like, "Yeah, let's freaking try to do this," you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Jeff Staple: And to me—and I think people in Hollywood will appreciate this—like, it was a new distribution channel, right? Like, it's a store in SoHo, but that's all it is. But from me giving out shirts to friends at school to now there will be a store in SoHo sharing my stuff, like, 24/7 was, like, really, really exciting to me, you know? And it was soon after, another store in SoHo picked it up and then another store.

And then, before I knew it, you know, I said in my book, like a store in Japan would call soon, like within months, right? So the—like, I didn't think of it as like, wow, this is big business. I thought of it as almost like—almost like a graffiti artist. Like, I'm getting my art more up in certain surfaces.

[PAOLA PICKS UP BOOK]

Paola Mardo: I mean, I wanted to—because I love what you say in the book about this. I guess, for context for the young folks, this is pre-social media. So you basically—this was like marketing.

Jeff Staple: This is pre-internet.

Paola Mardo: Pre-internet, there you go!

Jeff Staple: Literally pre—

Paola Mardo: But I like when you talk about—you write about the "power of the T-shirt." And I'll just read a little bit of this. So you said, "People in urban cities and what they wear are exposed to thousands of eyeballs every day. To me, the power of the T-shirt in particular is incredible. If you can get 100 people to wear a T-shirt you made, that is arguably more powerful than a billboard in Times Square." And then you say, "It's much more guerrilla and punk, if you will, because it's like infiltrating." Do you still feel like a T-shirt has power today?

Jeff Staple: 100,000 percent.

Paola Mardo: And why?

Jeff Staple: For the reasons I said, but, like, there's nothing really so democratic where anybody can make a T-shirt, especially today. You could literally just go on a website, and you can make a shirt tomorrow. And then you wear it, you give it to another friend—also the multiplying, compounding effect of like 12 of your friends wearing a shirt out in the world, like that—the number of eyeballs, as I said, for what, like, \$10 to make the shirt? You know, now you could, like, do the thing in Canvas and then go to Zazzle or CafePress and just make a shirt, right? It's so easy, so much easier today. It's a really powerful medium. And I think just fashion and sneakers, all of this is like, all of us in this room made a decision before they left the house, right? [POINTING] Like, he's wearing a blank white pocket tee, but he chose not to wear the tee with the graphic on it. He chose to wear the blank tee. So even if you're blank, you're making a statement about who you are, you know? You almost can't avoid it.

I recently was talking to a young artist friend, a painter. And she was sort of stuck at a crossroads recently, and she was asking me for advice. And I told her, "Let me give you some homework." I said, "The next time we meet, and it's going to be, like, in two weeks, I want you to make a T-shirt. You can do it, like, from your phone right now, and by next time we meet, I want you to give me the T-shirt," right? And she, like, kind of didn't understand why.

And then we met again, and then she made the shirt. She made the art, and she brought the shirt. And then she gave it to me, and I was like, "This is so dope!" And I was like, "How do you feel?" And she's like, "Powerful." For some reason, putting something from here to this to a shirt and then wearing it and then having other people wear it and seeing other people wear it is such a powerful thing, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Jeff Staple: And I wonder what—like, what's the equivalent of that in, in filmmaking? I guess it's making a thing from your brain and having somebody else watch it onscreen is like, yeah, you want to see the thing on screen, but I also want to see your reaction to it, you know? So it's kind of like that weird dichotomy, as well. Like, it's so cool. Like, to this day, if I see a stranger wearing STAPLE, like, my jaw kind of drops. I'm just like, you bought that! That's awesome.

Paola Mardo: Yeah!

[5:39 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: People who will be watching this, they're probably in the industry or want to break in or are trying to figure things out. And I think the number one question on some people's minds is, How do I even get a manager? So how does one get a manager, Swoope?

James Swoope: Oh, that's tricky. On what level? It's kind—I mean, it's so many different ways to bring in a manager, right? I mean, I always say, "Have something to manage." Like, when it comes to, like, the level that, you know, I'm at, it's have something to manage.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Can you just explain that a bit? Because I feel like, especially, like, first-time filmmakers or, like, young or emerging actors, you always kind of get in your head that, oh, you need these certain things in your career. One is, like, a representative, whether it's a manager or agent. So—but you're saying you need to have something to manage.

James Swoope: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Which makes sense, but can you explain that a little bit more?

James Swoope: Yeah. I feel like some people forget that they are artists, right? And they get so caught up in the business that they really don't know about, which is fine, that it kind of take away from what they're creating. So, if I'm talking to a filmmaker, and they like, "I need a manager because I got this idea and dah, dah, dah, dah," you are—to me, all I heard was, "I need somebody to do the work for me," because that's how you think this goes.

What you really need to be thinking about is: How do I take this idea, where I'm at, to create the best version of this? Or any idea, you know? Maybe some things you hold onto when you get a little bit, you know, whatever it is, but there's always something that can be done on whatever level you at. You start doing that, you start making noise, you start networking, these pieces fall into place. But if you spending all your time not working on the creative because you feel like you can't start this because you need a manager, you're wasting time.

If you a actor, take your ass to school. Go sharpen the tools. Go to these networking events. Go to this, go to that. Cold emailing people? I'm not saying it's never worked, but if you going to cold email, be doing 100 other things too, you know what I'm saying?

Paola Mardo: Exactly. You have to have something to manage.

James Swoope: 100 percent.

Paola Mardo: I mean, I think about even how you got in touch with Charles King. You were already doing so many other things.

James Swoope: Correct.

Paola Mardo: And you weren't like, "Hey, I want to work for you or with you?" You were, like, "Oh, business for this casting agency that I'm working with." Like, you were thinking bigger.

James Swoope: It was that, but it was also—to that point, it was suggested. I was suggested. Like, you know, like, you know, he had a specific type of person that he needed for the job, and, you know, he put out some feelers, and I came up as a name multiple times. But that's because of what I'm talking about, you know? I wasn't waiting on a Charles. I wasn't waiting on anybody but God. And me and Him are tag-team champions, so, you know, He was figuring it out.

Paola Mardo: No, I love that. We talked on the phone before this, and you mentioned it's—you're in “the 10 percent business, and it's up to the talent to do the other 90 percent.”

James Swoope: Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Can you add something more to that? Because I love it. It stuck in my head.

James Swoope: Yeah. I mean, you know, I have this client and a friend, his name is DeVon Libran, and we were talking one day, you know, about—about different artists and how they look at things and how they look at reps, you know, because I feel like, throughout time, representation evolved, right? Like, there was a point where you did one thing, and then a rep—like, you literally sat at home and did pretty much nothing, and a rep did a lot of the work, right? There was a time when that happened.

But even in those times, if you look at the difference between the artist and where their career went, the people who really made the most noise, you know, did things still on their own. So a lot of people I've talked to artist-wise, you know, they forget that they're artists, and they forget that of course a lot of opportunity might come directly to you because another artist—you know, you guys have ideas and all these things. And as long as you're not, you know, waiting around and you're doing what you're supposed to do, DeVon said to me, like, "Bro, you know what somebody told me one day?"

I said, "What?"

He was like, "Somebody told me, like, you only get paid 10 percent. So it's up to me to give them the other 90." And I was like—I'm stealing that, for one, and for two, it's true because if you're not connecting on your level of artistry, what am I supposed to be doing? And in 2025, that whole, "I was in this big blockbuster movie on—that came out Friday, so Monday, I better have 14, 15 offers on the table," that shit dead. You want to know why it's dead?

Paola Mardo: Why?

James Swoope: Because we got away from being artists, and the industry has suffered from it, and it's forcing us to go back to that shit. So, yes, don't be afraid to—to go out there and connect with other artists and do some artist shit. That don't take your manager to set that up. That don't take an agent to set that up. We can scale the deal and to, you know, help place it and make it happen, but don't forget you an artist because you wasting time waiting on me. I'm 10 percent because that's what I'm getting, but you the 90.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

James Swoope: And that don't mean that I'm not doing hella work or nothing like that. That just mean that you got to care more than I do.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

[12:01 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Well, going back to the writing real quick, too, starting is hard, but being consistent, I feel like is also harder. How do you stay consistent, even now, to continue that writing habit?

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. Even then, I think I was going to be a writer. I was very lucky to have Greg Berlanti as a producer on Supergirl. And he did get on a Zoom with me, which I thought, when I got the text, it was, like, a prank person. And he read the script, and he was like, "So you're a writer. How do we support you?"

And I was like, "No, I'm not a writer. I wrote an episode." He was like, "Okay, reframe that. You're a writer."

And I was like, "I'm a baby writer." He was like, "Take the word 'baby' out. You're a writer." And I kept saying thank you, and he was like, "Say it once." And then he was like, "Well, what do you want?" And I was nervous, and he was like, "You can be confident in what you"—and, like, all of these little micro-lessons. And so I was like—you know, it's like practicing in the mirror. I joke, being a superhero, you have, like—for DC, at least, we had, like, superhero poses like hands on the hips, arms crossed, feet. They're just power poses, really, when you think about it.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wait, is it just, like, in a book or something that you're supposed to learn all these poses?

Azie Tesfai: Well, we just knew. So, like, when we had group superhero scenes, we were like, "Which one are you doing?" so we wouldn't all do the same one. But they're essentially power poses. And so people would think, like, "Oh, your suit made you confident." It's like, no, your superhero stance makes you confident, which is chin up, shoulders back, chest out, legs shoulder-length apart, which grounds you. So it was—you know, it's like that kind of helps you fake it until you make it in a weird way.

And so, with the writing, I was like, okay, I'm going to say these words that this person I respect so much as, like, a forced mentor is telling me to say, but I don't believe them.

Paola Mardo: Reframe that: as a mentor!

Azie Tesfai: As a mentor! See? He would say the same thing. But I—but I, I was like—I didn't believe it at first, but then the crazy thing is, he was like, "Start asking people for things, and you'll be surprised how they say yes."

Paola Mardo: Hell, yeah. Snaps to that. Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: And then around, around the same time, I had a—Susan Rovner, who was at Warner Bros. at the time, had—we were doing some work thing. And she was like, "I don't mean to be—overstep, but have you heard of the tiara syndrome?"

And I was like, "Tiara syndrome? What's that?"

And she was like, "It's when you work really hard, and you keep your head down, and you wait for someone else to crown you. But you need to lift your head up and crown yourself."

Paola Mardo: Ooh!

Azie Tesfai: And I was like, "Oh, I have that." She was like, "I know." And so, so then I was like—I started—she was like, "Try asking." And so she was kind of my first ask of something. And then I started asking people, "Can I pitch you?" or I would start DM-ing old writers from shows I worked on like, "Hey, can I!"—

Paola Mardo: I'm taking notes right now. Oh, my gosh.

Azie Tesfai: "Can I pitch you an idea?" which sliding into the DMs for me is for work.

Paola Mardo: I love that.

Azie Tesfai: I was sliding into DMs of people I worked with eight years ago, and they would answer. It may take a while, but they were like, "This is wild, but yeah, here's my number. You want to call me and pitch your idea?"

Paola Mardo: Sick.

Azie Tesfai: And people, in the beginning especially, were like, "Yeah, yeah!" And I couldn't believe it.

Paola Mardo: But I have to say you also have to have the drive, and you have to be good. And I'm not saying, like, you have to be perfect at it, but I feel like you had the drive, and you work really hard. You have the ethic. If you didn't have that—

Azie Tesfai: I had the idea then.

Paola Mardo: An idea, yeah. Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah. I didn't know how, necessarily, but I had the idea. And thanks to the support of those people that were like, "Just start asking," I started asking for help, which is, like, as an immigrant child, as a woman, we don't—

Paola Mardo: So hard!

Azie Tesfai: So hard. There was a script that I had written that I really wanted to do, and I had mentioned it to Greg. And he was like, "Let's do it. Let's see it." And I was like, "It's not ready." And I held onto this precious thing. And someone at the CW was like, "We'd love to see it." And I—and then, you know, the network fell apart. And I just remember I was like—I read it recently, and I was like, oh, it was good! Like, why didn't you just—

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Azie Tesfai: You know? And so now I'm like, don't make that mistake again.

Paola Mardo: Do you feel like it was perfectionism or something or—

Azie Tesfai: I think, as women, many times we feel like we need to do things 20 times to do the—to be given first chance. Like, I have another friend who created a show and wanted to direct it. And she waited three seasons, and there were directors coming in who had never done it before, and it wasn't even their show. But she was like, "I need to shadow one more time," or it's that need of us feeling like we have to be so ready.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Azie Tesfai: Versus, like, it's okay if we jump in and we make mistakes. And so I think, like, once I got that, I was like, I'm, I'm actually—I'm not totally ready, but I have these ideas. And I just wrote one-pagers. And I wrote these one-pagers. I asked—you know, Berlanti Productions was like my home, kind of. I had been working with them for so long. And then I had Jenny Ermin, who I had worked with for so long. And I was like, "Can you send me samples of pitches?"

Paola Mardo: You asked for that?

Azie Tesfai: Of old pitches.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Azie Tesfai: And then I'd just study them, and then I just literally matched them with my idea. And then I would give those to writers that I wanted to work with.

Paola Mardo: Amazing. Amazing.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah, fake it until you make it.

Paola Mardo: Fake it until you make it.

Azie Tesfai: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Slide into those DMs.

Azie Tesfai: Say thank you once.

Paola Mardo: Yes. Don't, don't slide into DMs for—for work purposes, for work.

Azie Tesfai: I mean, you can slide into DMs for whatever you want. But it really—it really—and I've had writers now message me and be like, "Hey, my showrunner's doing a project with you, and they say that you slid into his DMs. What was the wording you used?"

Paola Mardo: I love that.

Azie Tesfai: I was like, "Just ask."

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Just ask.

Azie Tesfai: Worst they'll say is no.

Paola Mardo: Yes. That's true. I've learned that, too.

[16:59 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

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For transcripts and more information, head to proximitymedia.com.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]