

Ivan Dashkov Transcript

Ivan: I think the vision or the future is AR glasses where they can project right onto the lens. I think that technology is going to take off. So who knows? It's not going to be two years from now, five years from now, or 10 years from now when that's going to be viable. But when you have a lightweight pair of glasses that you can have something on the lens that gives you directions or has different apps that overlay your real-world environment, I think that's going to be the aha moment for a lot of people.

Matt: To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to The Speed of Culture. We're live here at Commerce Week in the Adweek podcast studio in New York City, in freezing New York City today. And we're thrilled to be joined by Ivan Dashkov, the head of emerging marketing tech at PUMA Group. Ivan's responsible for PUMA teaming up with Meta for a VR experience that captures the smallest gym in the world. Can't wait to hear more about that. Ivan, great to see you today.

Ivan: Yeah, thanks for having me. It's good to be back in New York. I lived here for six years, so I love coming back. I always gain about 10 pounds when I come back because I just keep going to my food spots.

Matt: And where are you based out of?

Ivan: In Boston.

Matt: Okay.

Ivan: Yeah, in the North Shore, right in the water. It's beautiful up there.

Matt: Very cool. So tell me, I know you launched this partnership with Meta. What do you feel about the future of VR in general? I mean, it's such a polarizing thing. I was just talking to some of my colleagues before this about the new Apple device, their VR device. And some people love it. And then some people are saying, oh, everyone's taking it back. Where do you see that space going overall?

Ivan: Yeah, I think overall, I think the space is growing. Like if you look at Meta's headset sales, I feel like they just keep going up and up and up. And obviously, Apple's brought so much attention to the space itself. And you see all these kinds of funny memes of people walking down the street or driving cars, wearing their Apple Vision Pros. So I think that's bringing a lot more attention to the space. I think the space is interesting. I think there's a lot of stuff that's happening that's bringing more people into the space. Meta has this new game, Asgard's Wrath 2, that's got incredibly high reviews from all the video game reviewers. So that's bringing an audience too. But for me, I think the vision, or excuse me, the future is AR glasses where they can kind of project right onto the lens. And I think that technology is going to take off. So. No one who knows? It's not going to be two years from now, five years from now, or 10 years from now when that's going to be viable. But when you have like a lightweight pair of glasses

you can have something on the lens that kind of gives you directions or has different apps that kind of overlay your real-world environment. I think that's going to be the aha moment for a lot of people.

Matt: Yeah, we had Rachael Scott, who's the head of Meta Reality Labs on right before the holidays. And she convinced me about these new Ray-Ban glasses that came out. And I bought them for our entire exec team. And I can tell you that then going on vacation with my family, provides a great utility. And I could see what you're saying, in terms of the form factor of Ray-Ban glasses you're already aware, it means that you don't have to change any consumer behavior. And then if you have an overlay where it provides a real utility where you can take pictures, see what's going on, see what you're looking at. I do think with some type of AI integration, that could be something that could be pretty powerful.

Ivan: And this space has been evolving too. I remember when Snapchat Spectacles came around too. We were using it when I used to work at the NBA, getting content there. So it's a fun space that's going to continue evolving. And maybe one day it's going to replace the iPhone. Who knows?

Matt: Yeah, who knows? Yeah, it'll be interesting. So let's talk about PUMA You've been there for five years. PUMA is an interesting brand. I think if you look throughout history, it has its peaks and valleys. It's not a company like Under Armour which had its challenges and arguably never recovered. And it's not a Nike that was like a rocket ship, right? It's a company that has kind of ebbed and flowed with culture. Today, how would you describe the PUMA brand? What are the brand pillars that make it different? And where are you hoping to take the brand moving forward?

Ivan: Yeah, it's been a fun journey of being at PUMA for five years. I think to be honest with you, in the early 2000s, we were almost a little bit dead in the water. And then we had a new CEO come in. He helped turn the company around. We had Usain Bolt. He helped turn the company around. Rihanna came in and had some big collections that kind of made us culturally relevant. It's been really fun being at PUMA because it almost feels like a startup in some ways. Every year since I've been there, it's been our best year ever. Not because of me, but I'll take some credit. But we're continuing to grow. And you see the company going to different spaces. And I think right now we're very focused on making sure that we're credible in the performance space. So we completely redid our running shoes about three years ago. We have some high-quality running shoes now. If you go to YouTube and you look at running reviewers, they love our shoes and give us a lot of credibility there. We're getting more and more market share in football, in European football. We're doing a strong job there. Basketball, we relaunched about five years ago. And I think we've done a great job with basketball, like kind of finding our niche and how we kind of want to communicate ourselves. Because I think some of the other brands there are very established. And if we just kind of copied their marketing, I don't think we would have succeeded. But we kind of came in with a different perspective. And I think that gives us some space in basketball that a lot of people didn't expect us to kind of grab before.

Matt: Yeah, it's interesting. Frankly, I was a bit surprised to hear you say you're leaning toward the performance side. There's this dichotomy in the sneaker space where you're either a lifestyle fashion brand or you're a performance brand. And some brands like Nike have been able to straddle both with their Air Jordans being in the popular lexicon, but also obviously on the corners. Yeah.

Ivan: I think we, we were too focused on the style space for a long time. And that's still a huge part of our business. So it's not like we're-

Matt: It's more transient though, right? It's hard to have staying power if you're just on that side.

Ivan: Exactly. We're not pivoting away from that. But I think we just need to make sure that we're also established in the performance space. We have credibility there because I think that's going to help our more sport-style collections as well.

Matt: So if you're going into performance space, just curiously, what are your thoughts on all the evolution with college athletics and the name-interest likeness deals? I mean, do you think ultimately it's a good thing for your category? And how are brands like PUMA looking at that opportunity?

Ivan: Yeah, I mean, before PUMA I was a sports media major in college. This is something I kind of studied and looked at a lot. And I always thought that college athletes should be paid and should be making revenue based on how their likeness is used. So I think it's a great move and a welcome shift. We've had some NIL deals in the basketball space, especially I think that we've had some great successes there. So it's pretty fun that we can kind of work with some younger athletes and kind of use their personalities and partner with them. So for us as a brand, we've experimented there and we will continue to experiment there.

Matt: Absolutely. And when you look at just PUMA in terms of building the brand, you have your endorsement deals with athletes and you want to see them on the field or on the court. And then obviously we'll talk about some of the brand deals that you're doing, like the meta deal that we mentioned. And then there's you partnering with retailers and making sure. So how's that side evolving in terms of the digital versus in-store mix with the distribution of your products?

Ivan: Yeah, for me, one of my biggest focuses is building our digital goods business. So it's like, how do we get digital PUMA goods on our consumers' avatars when they're playing Roblox or they're playing Fortnite or they're playing any of these other games? Or with Meta, we were the first sportswear brand to be featured in their avatar store, and the first brand in general to use their new diverse body features as well. Because people are spending more and more time in these digital environments and culture is happening in these digital environments. If you look at Fortnite, all these concerts are happening. Same thing in Roblox, more and more concerts are happening there too. So there's a convergence between culture and gaming. And now we need to be in that space because we want to be where culture is happening. So we've done a couple of great Roblox activations and we have, I think, over 4 million Roblox digital goods that consumers have claimed and are wearing these games, which is great to see that these young consumers are taking PUMA products and wearing them in their Roblox experiences.

Matt: And at what point do you have to straddle the line between being cutting edge or bleeding edge? Meaning that we're in a broader macro and economic environment, which is, some days good, some days not so good. I'm sure your company, like every other, is pressured to show ROI and spend. So when you do things that are more edgy or non-traditional digital goods or doing something in VR or AR, is it harder to sell that through? And how do you look at tracking ROI for something like that?

Ivan: I think for digital goods, it's an interesting one because there are opportunities that are just marketing-based where we do something in Roblox and it's more because Roblox has a huge young demographic that we want to target. But there are also these other games that are looking for brands like PUMA to kind of give them credibility. So we work with them and do licensing deals or do deals where we'll do revenue shares on the products sold. So it's also building a revenue stream for us.

Matt: So kids will pay to wear custom-branded PUMA shoes in a Roblox environment.

Ivan: Yeah, but I feel like people are so focused on kids that like, sometimes they don't think about these other games that might be like 35 to 40 years old, like female demographic.

Matt: Right.

Ivan: It's a completely different.

Matt: You're right. It's good.

Ivan: Yeah. So I think there's a lot of different opportunities out there. And for us, it's like finding all these different opportunities, and some of them we're not going to make money off. We're just kind of doing it there for the marketing. But some of them kind of make more sense to us to do kind of revenue share deals or licensing deals and us being in those environments. And this is like a double benefit, right? Because we're still getting marketing from it, but then we're also kind of building a new revenue stream.

Matt: Yeah. So as head of emerging marketing technology, obviously you're looking at these new streams and making sure that your brand is where the eyeballs are gravitating towards. How did the partnership with Meta come about? Talk to us about how a partnership like that gets established. How did you land on the actual idea and how was it brought to life?

Ivan: We've had a relationship with Meta for a long time because of Instagram and our Facebook.

Matt: As an advertiser.

Ivan: Correct. And also like organically. So we've built that relationship and I used to be the head of social. So I kind of have some of those ties there. And then this opportunity kind of came up to be featured in their avatar store. They were looking for a sportswear brand. And again, we were kind of building our digital goods business. So our interests kind of aligned there and we launched there. And I think we just had a really good partnership with them. We enjoyed working with them. We enjoyed our meetings. And that was like the first project. And that one went well. Their executives were very happy with it. So then they had this second project they wanted to do where they were kind of focused on the German market and kind of getting people to try on VR. So they were talking to us because obviously, we're a German-based brand as well. So we came up with the idea of doing the world's smallest gym. And the idea is you just put on a VR headset and you could do some of these different workout apps.

Matt: Is that idea that you came up with in your team at PUMA or did you collaborate with Meta on the concept?

Ivan: Collaborate with Meta on it.

Matt: That's great.

Ivan: We built these, like, little pods that people can kind of step into. They were co-branded PUMA and Meta. People could try on the VR headset and work out in our PUMA flagship store and then a couple of big shopping centers in Berlin. It's been a nice success. I think Meta is happy with it. PUMA is happy with it. We're looking for other places that we could potentially bring the workout pods to. It's opened some other doors at Meta for us too that we're talking about potentially doing some other activations with that are still a little bit TBD.

Matt: We'll be right back with the speed of culture after a few words from our sponsors. So is it an actual physical space you enter or are you just wearing a headset and you just make sure that you don't punch somebody accidentally when you're trying to work out?

Ivan: No, it's like an actual physical space that we built out. Actually, like a gorgeous design, but you kind of go in there. There are a couple of little demos that you do where you're working out. And it also kind of creates a little social video for you to take home and post on your Instagram channel if you want.

Matt: And I imagine with an activation like that, it's also as much about how you take the story of what you're doing and scale it and connect it to your brand through social and other channels. That's equally as important as the amount of people that physically touch and feel the space, which is somewhat limited by the physicality of it.

Ivan: We brought in Dennis Schroeder from our side, one of our basketball ambassadors. That's also German. So that was the great person Kai Kai Brighan and great ambassador Kai Brighan. He did a couple of videos for us that did well on social. I think one of them got over 20 million views.

Matt: I saw one organically.

Ivan: Oh?

Matt: Yeah. Before I even knew an interview was happening.

Ivan: And then Meta has so many great relationships with influencers and creators. So they brought in a few of theirs that they've worked with in the past. We brought in a few of ours that we worked with in the past. And we had a great kickoff event that produced a lot of great content from it.

Matt: It's awesome. And before you were at PUMA you spent six years at the NBA, which would be a dream job for me. I'm a huge basketball fan. You know, how do you get a job at the NBA? Because so many basketball fans, they would love to work there. How did you land that role?

Ivan: Well, the NBA kind of reminds you of that too. They're like, hey, we'll have 5,000 people ready. Take your job tomorrow. But it was funny. It was the early days of social media. And I wanted to work in sports PR. So I applied for this role. I got the role. And I was like, oh, cool. I'll do this for a year. Then maybe I can sneak into the PR department.

Matt: You applied for the role at the NBA?

Ivan: Yeah.

Matt: So you just sent in your resume and they hired you. You didn't know anybody?

Ivan: So I was a Boston Celtics intern in college.

Matt: So that's the real. Right.

Ivan: And then also, we had LeBron's former publicist speak at my college as well. So I built a little bit of a connection with him. So I got recommended from.

Matt: I think that's important. The reason I'm asking that is we have a lot of younger listeners here at Speed of Culture and trying to figure out how to get that dream job. And I think a misconception some people have, especially with what I think is a little bit of an entitled generation, Gen Z, where it's like, oh, I worked hard. I have a great resume. I'm going to send it in. I should get the role. I have kids who are late teens now and are thinking about internships. And I'm telling them, you have to go get it. And you have to find that right point of experience. So how did you intern the Boston Celtics? How did you get in there to begin with?

Ivan: So our college had a good relationship with the head of HR. So I got an email one day from my advisor. And he was like, hey, they're looking for an intern. You're from Boston. Do you want to do this? And I'm like, hell yeah, I want to do this. But even before that, I worked at Watkins Glen International, which is a small racetrack in upstate New York. I was a media center volunteer there. That led to my Boston Celtics media relations internship. And then also that connection with LeBron's former publicist. It's funny. I had dinner with him a couple of years ago at an All-Star game. And we were kind of talking about that moment. And he's like, yeah. It was like you and this other guy that were following up with me. But then he fell off and you kept following up with me. That's what happens. And then when that role came up and you asked me to recommend you, I was like, hell yeah. I know this guy. So it was kind of important to keep up that connection. And you have to figure out the right amount of times to follow up because you don't want to be too overzealous. But you also don't want to fall off either.

Matt: Yeah. But it's so much the case with so many opportunities that it's just a war of attrition. Just like I can tell you running a startup, so many competitors at launch, when Suzy launched, are gone. And maybe their product wasn't as good. Maybe it was. But the founder just didn't want to deal with the headaches that COVID brought on or uncertainty in funding or whatever. And eventually, people just start to fall off. And you're like, oh, wow, we're the only one left standing. And it's very much how you succeed.

Ivan: Sometimes you just keep trying until you get it right.

Matt: Yeah. So you're at the NBA. And I know that you helped there as well, identifying lots of partnerships with companies like Reddit and Snapchat, et cetera. How are you as a professional, obviously fast forward to today as well, able to keep your finger on the pulse of emerging trends to know this is where things are going? This is a new platform coming out that we need to test out. How do you personally spend your time in terms of the information you consume that you think puts you in that position?

Ivan: I'll say it was probably a little bit easier when I was younger and I was 23, 24 and I was using Snapchat every day. And all my friends were using Snapchat every day. And I was like, well, this is what people are using and this is what we should be jumping onto. So that's kind of how it kind of happened with some of those platforms. Like I was on NBA Reddit. I still am on NBA Reddit every single day, kind of seeing what's happening in the league. So I was like, we should be here. This is where our core fans are. This is like their clubhouse. So we want to be kind of engaging in that clubhouse. The Snapchat one's funny because I had to sell that internally. And you're talking to these older executives and they're like, isn't this like a sexting platform?

Matt: Even Reddit had a lot of bad vibes early on.

Ivan: Yeah, of course.

Matt: Yeah.

Ivan: I mean, all these platforms have gone through their different scandals.

Matt: Some still are immersion scandals.

Ivan: Yeah, for sure. I mean, they all are. So it's kind of like an interesting place to kind of navigate. But luckily with the league, this has always kind of stuck with me. For example, when YouTube came along, the NBA didn't take down its highlights when people were posting highlights and the other leagues did. And the NBA was like, this is basically like free marketing for us. Like, people are watching these clips and getting excited about NBA basketball. And now all the leagues kind of allow people to put up highlights across all these social platforms.

Matt: Yeah, they've given them control.

Ivan: Yeah.

Matt: They used to say the NBA stood for nothing but attorneys.

Ivan: Exactly, yeah.

Matt: So I guess eventually they had to relinquish some of that control if they wanted to be relevant.

Ivan: But in the social space, they were very progressive and really kind of let people play with it and kind of help own the brand. I think if you look at the NBA's social following, a part of their success was because they really kind of let go of control, kind of let this community evolve around the NBA itself. Like the NBA, Twitter is one of the biggest Twitters out there too.

Matt: Yeah. I think the younger generation consumes sports by the song versus the album, meaning they follow the players, not the teams. We've seen an explosion of fantasy sports and gambling, for better or worse, which is infiltrating our society. So I think it's changed fandom in general, and people are much more focused on the highlights and the clips than full games, especially younger consumers.

Ivan: Yeah, if you look at ratings, like NBA ratings, they could probably be better, in my opinion. But if you look at how many people are digesting social media clips of the top plays or watching condensed games, it's incredible. People love NBA content. And it's kind of interesting, almost what's happening around the NBA, off of the court, is almost eclipsing what's happening on the actual on-court action itself.

Matt: Yeah, I mean, you have a lot of players like Draymond Green starting podcasts and JJ Redick and people who are on the inside. So I think when I was growing up, you didn't have that type of access to players, besides the awkward interviews after the game when they're sweating next to the reporter. But now you really can get so much access, and they're talking all the time about what's happening.

Ivan: Yep. And one really interesting thing that I think helped shift this culture to the time was so controversial, but when David Stern did that dress code policy, he had to have players dress up. And it actually kind of vaulted these players into fashion icons and made really kind of those tunnel walks more like runways, where people were showing off the latest fashion. Now you see every brand is trying to get a basketball player to kind of wear their latest gear in these tunnels because that's where a lot of fashion culture happens though.

Matt: Yeah. You look at Beats headphones, which ended up getting acquired by Apple, and they'll tell you it was both the Olympics and those fashion walks like you said.

Ivan: When they showed up in China, they all came off the airplane wearing Beats. That was one of the biggest market moments for them.

Matt: Absolutely. So shifting gears a little bit to here at Commerce Week, shout out to Adweek for access to this great Adweek podcast studio. E-commerce has changed over time and continues to change. Amazon is now selling retail media, so they're trying to get their piece of the pie. Google's changing with the advent of AI. Platforms like TikTok are leaning toward social selling. As a brand that I'm sure makes e-commerce at the top of its list in terms of something to think about to drive growth, where do you see those trends in the world of commerce?

Ivan: Yeah, I think for us, we want to continue building our DTC business. And that's been something that we focused on these last five years. But I think there's still such a big opportunity working with these big wholesale partners. And that's still such a large part of our business. So for us, it's to continue working with being good partners, evolving with them. And I always tell these partners, we want to be a guinea pig. We want to be the beta test partner. If you want to try something new, call us. We'll figure it out. We'll work with you. Think of us in that way.

Matt: Awesome. So wrapping up here, Ivan, you've had an awesome career and you're very much in the middle of it. You kind of stole the thunder a little bit by talking about some of the lessons you've learned in your career in terms of not giving up, being aggressive, focusing on

what you want, and going for. Are there any other pieces of advice you can give to some of our younger listeners in terms of making the right decisions earlier in your career to set yourself up to be in a position where you are today, where you're on stage at Commerce Week and here talking with me about very cool stuff that you're doing with companies like Meta?

Ivan: So I think there's like this backlash against grind culture, which makes sense. Like I think people working 70, 80 hours a week, that's crazy. But you know, in those early days of the NBA, when I was 22, 23, and I had no responsibilities, I had no kids.

Matt: That's when you want to do it, right?

Ivan: That's when I did it. Like my first NBA job, I was making \$20 an hour living in New York City. Like it was-

Matt: Probably having the best time ever.

Ivan: Yeah, it was so much fun. Yeah, living in a shoebox.

Matt: No pun intended.

Ivan: No, yeah. There was no heat in my apartment. Like that's how crazy it was back then. But I ground it out. I got to do all these awesome, crazy partnerships with Snapchat. We know we worked and did these, what's like every all-star game, you know, met every single basketball player. Like got a lot of like cool things that I got to do, but I also made so many great connections and built such a great network that when I got an opportunity to become the head of social at PUMA that was my first job at PUMA like came up, I got in. And then I brought in all this a wealth of knowledge of how to build a great social team for my experience at the NBA. And then I, it was funny because like PUMA social was so early back then. And I just kind of came in with like some simple learnings that I have from the NBA. Bringing that in there, it completely transformed PUMA social. It made me look like a rockstar at PUMA So kind of grinding it out there early, kind of helped me succeed at PUMA And now I think it's a little bit of the opposite where it's like, I always used to think like I would give like 110% of how like good that is. But like now I feel like it's better to kind of do a little bit less and focus on a few big projects instead of trying to do way too many things. Because if you're giving like 110% across 10 projects versus 90% across three projects, you're probably gonna do better with the three projects than you would with the 10 projects.

Matt: Yeah. Also as you grow in your career, I'm sure leading a team, recruiting, and retaining talent is a huge part of your success.

Ivan: That's the big thing too. A lot of people are afraid of bringing talent because it might make them seem redundant. But I was very lucky with my hires at PUMA They came in and they were all rock stars and they've all gone on to do amazing things at PUMA or in other places too. So that made my life so much easier when I was like, oh, I can just trust this person to do their job. I don't need to overlook their shoulder. That frees up me to do other things too.

Matt: Absolutely. So to wrap it up, Ivan, is there a Montrealer sign that you live by? Any kind of good sports analogies you're going to throw at me?

Ivan: PUMA pays my bills. So I have to say forever faster. You know, you always have to innovate. You always have to move forward. You always have to push the envelope.

Matt: Well, we are on The Speed of Culture podcast, so it fits well with us. That's perfect. Thanks so much for joining and taking time out of your busy schedule here in New York to speak with us today, Ivan.

Ivan: Thank you. This is awesome.

Matt: Absolutely. On behalf of Suzy and the Adweek team, thanks again to Ivan Dashkov, head of emerging marketing tech at PUMA Group for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review The Speed of Culture podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Until next time, see you soon, everyone. Take care. The Speed of Culture is brought to you by Suzy as part of the Adweek Podcast Network and Acast Creator Network. You can listen and subscribe to all Adweek podcasts by visiting adweek.com/podcasts. To find out more about Suzy, head to suzy.com. And make sure to search for The Speed of Culture on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Google Podcasts, or anywhere else podcasts are found. Click follow so you don't miss out on any future episodes. On behalf of the team here at Suzy, thanks for listening.