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As told to Gary Canino, 1760 words.

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On sticking to your principles

An interview with yogurt entrepreneur Siggi Hilmarsson

What's something you wish you could have told yourself when you were first starting out?

I started doing this just because I really like the idea of the product. Technically, I thought it could become very big, but I sort of have this Scandinavian mentality of being modest. So I didn't really plan for the company to be successful, and that caused us a lot of difficulties in the beginning. The plant wasn't big enough, and we didn't have enough people working. When you start any kind of venture, you have to plan for success and then just be only a little bit disappointed if it's not successful.

My background was in business, but I was always a poor fit with the business world. I had a horrible job and I was useless at it, an extremely poor fit. I probably would have gotten fired. I had a hard time finding a job, and the only people who wanted to hire me were these consultants. That's kind of when the yogurt started happening. When I came up with this idea, there was a bunch of things that seemed to make it a good one. What tipped me over was when I was starting thinking about it more as a business than just a hobby. I realized that, and I guess this is important for any creative endeavor, I felt really good about failing. I didn't feel good about the failing itself, but I realized that if it failed, I could sort of walk away from it with my head high, that I tried something worthwhile, you know? Being risk averse myself, I felt like that was a good thing to try. If I had tried something just for the money, or done something that I really didn't believe in and failed, I would have walked away from it feeling very awkward and embarrassed.

There's that classic artist cliché, which maybe has some truth, that struggling is "good" for art.

It would have been nice to step straightaway into success, but yes, maybe a struggle is not necessarily bad. It took a couple of years to finally start to see some mainstream acceptance. It's good to have had to go through sticking to your opinion and point of view, and not having things be successful right away. You learn that way. Otherwise, you're just lucky.

Andy Warhol said "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art."

It's hard to combine the two, right? It's hard to do something you really like, and then eventually make it into a profitable enterprise without losing your values. We probably could have gotten the business off to a faster start by making the yogurt a little bit sweeter or using extra flavoring. But that would have been a bad decision because we would have had a better business in the short term, and a weaker brand in the long term. Now we truly do stand for something, and if we had weakened that, we would have been less successful. I don't think people would have cared. There would have been more people who liked the product a little bit, but we wouldn't have been as unique. So I think the struggle was worth it, both for the artistic integrity of the product, but also for the long term business prospects, because you have something that's much more unique and whole and means something more. I think it is truly an art. Running a business is a very complicated enterprise. There's just so many things that could go wrong every single day, from the pure logistical operations, to the human element of picking good people, and working with them.

It's interesting that you describe yourself as risk averse, because making a low sugar yogurt before the health craze does seem like a risk.

Well, it was just a glaring hole in the market. And since I wanted it so badly, I assumed that even if there were even ten people who wanted it even a little bit less than I did, then it was a good idea. So it's kind of a funny thing where I don't know if I viewed it as a risk. I also viewed it as having to do something different. I put the risk of pursuing something I didn't like as higher than the risk of failure, because I thought my odds of failing were just as high, if not higher. I'd never have forgiven myself if I hadn't at least tried.

Obviously I needed to make money, and I wanted to be profitable, but I wanted to follow that path on my terms; creating this product that I so truly believed in. Aesthetically, I prefer blatant, clear cut statements about what the product is, rather than marketing hyperbole. It's not trying to be the coolest thing you've ever had, just one that you're happy to have. I wouldn't want to be the 'it' product per se, because then you sort of date yourself a little bit. I just want to create something that you feel like

you could always have, and you're always happy it's there, but you're never like, "This is the coolest thing in the world."

That goes back to your modest work ethic.

Yeah, but the problem is, if you say you're modest, then you're not really modest anymore. It's a super difficult thing to be self-aware about your self-awareness, right? It's more about having a sense of certain types of subtleties, you know, and just telling people what you offer. I really dislike it when brands assume a certain familiarity with the consumer. I don't assume that I know why people like my product. I prefer to put out a profile that I think is the right profile of the product for people to eat, but I do not presume I know their intentions, necessarily.

I saw an ad once, by a company who will not be named, that basically said "We don't really need to advertise to you, because we know you're sophisticated." It was all over New York on billboards, and I saw the ad and I was like, "I'm never buying this product again." I'm so self-conscious about this sort of thing that I didn't want anybody thinking I'd never bought the product before, and then bought it because of the ads. Because they assumed so much familiarity with me and my tastes, I just stopped buying the product that I previously, actually, thought of as being decent quality. So I never really want to fall into that trap. Most of our advertising or marketing we've limited to literally telling people what makes us different, which is less sugar and cleaner ingredients.

Is it a collaborative process when you create new flavors?

The process is complicated a bit by our brand, which is having very little sugar and natural flavors. It makes reaching certain flavor profiles hard. Say for example, we wanted to make a cherry yogurt. Cherries are often naturally tart, and it's tricky to get the flavor to pop in a yogurt. So if you can't use sugar or flavoring to pump up the flavor profile of a cherry, it's sort of a twisted proposition, because Americans are used to cherry flavors being very sweet.

So it took us a really long time to come up with a good cherry flavor. In the end, it helped that the market came to us and people were more open to our very tart cherry, but that sort of makes the innovation process both harder and easier. It's harder for the dairy scientists that we work with because they have a much smaller box to work in, but it also easier because there are just fewer options to choose from.

We tend to be very simple, so most of our flavors are not trying to be super innovative. We have a seasonal flavor that changes every four months, and that's where we channel a lot of our "out there" creativity. Overall, we want to be a basic, stable product. We're often not trying to do something that's out there in terms of fruit and flavorings. It's more about doing these standard flavors very well. I'm sure as we get bigger, we'll need to have more options and try to be more creative, but we're still in the mindset of, "Oh, we could do a really good blackberry." People often really like those crazy flavors, but what happens is, they buy one [crazy flavor], and then they buy 10 vanillas.

There's a creativity in itself in setting simple boundaries and seeing what you can do with them. An example that comes to mind is Bjork's acappella album.

Yeah, if you don't have the entire tool box of big company food scientists, you start paying attention to things you wouldn't have paid attention to otherwise. You start picking fruit based on their ripeness. So if one manufacturer has peaches that are at a certain point to get the right flavor profile, you have to get [a different manufacturer] who gives you slightly more ripe fruit.

Why do so many yogurts have preservatives? Just so that it lasts longer on the shelf?

Yeah. Most yogurts don't really have preservatives. Yogurt is one of the oldest manufactured foods in the world, almost 9000 years old. The acidity that's created is a natural preservative. When I first came to America, you still saw quite a few yogurts that had all sorts of preservatives in it, but you don't really have that anymore, because I think most people realized a lot of consumers want the live active cultures, and preservatives kill the bad and good bacteria. Yogurt was discovered out of a need, because when people were starting to use mammal milk it was very volatile and died very fast. So if they could make it sour so that it lasted longer, it was very valuable.

Siggi recommends:

When I Stop Talking, You'll Know I'm Dead by Jerry Weintraub & Rich Cohen

The Sellout by Paul Beatty

The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P. by Adelle Waldman

The Patrick Melrose Series by Edward St Aubyn

I, Partridge: We Need to Talk About Alan by Alan Partridge

Name

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1