EPISODE 361

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[0:00:34]

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[INTRODUCTION]

FT: Welcome to So Money every one, thanks for joining me, I'm your host Farnoosh Torabi. Our guest today is someone that you're going to really love hearing form if you're entrepreneurial, if you are into the all-natural food trend, if you like adult beverages. Chris Wirth is here today, he founded American Juice Company in 2012, the company manufactures all natural cocktail mixers for premium bar establishments.

Chris founded the company in college with his friend Massimiliano Matté who is a reknowned mixologist, a nominee actually for the prestigious "Perfect Barman de Paris" award and known for his collaborations with celebrated chefs like Alain Ducasse and Heinz Beck. Their mixed blends are created with fresh, natural ingredients. So if you like the cold press juices and maybe you like a little vodka, you're going to love the American Juice Company and its variety of cocktail mixes.

Each variety is designed to stand alone or work in combination so you have endless opportunities. They recently launched into retail in the last six months. You may have actually seen their logo in whole foods, fresh direct, which is in New York City and a number of other independent retailers in the big apple. Chris is actually from New York. He was raised here.

And so we talked about his experience kind of growing up his foray into finance and entrepreneurship. How does a young guy in college actually develop a sophisticated company like this with no money really? His biggest failure so far, you're going to go through a lot of failure as an entrepreneur and he shares one of the biggest catastrophes that involve getting his product to market. And his number one habit that helps him with his finances that then also supports his ability to be entrepreneurial.

Here is Chris Wirth.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:03:16.4]

FT: Chris Wirth, welcome to So Money, I'm excited to have you on the show. Initially I was going to have on So Money Millennial week but I figured you are a standalone guest, you need your own day.

[0:03:29.0]

CW: Thank you Farnoosh, it's a pleasure to be here.

[0:03:31.5]

FT: Okay, you're a young guy, you're how old now? 24?

[0:03:34.8]

CW: I'm 26.

[0:03:36.0]

FT: Oh 26, okay, still.

[0:03:38.7]

CW: Just had my birthday the other month.

[0:03:40.9]

FT: Oh, happy birthday! You've crossed over the quarter century.

[0:03:45.6]

CW: I know, it's scary.

[0:03:47.0]

FT: Is it really?

[0:03:48.9]

CW: Well, it's exciting too. So we've done a lot so far and a lot more to get done.

[0:03:57.9]

FT: You're a beverage entrepreneur.

[0:04:00.5]

CW: Yeah.

[0:04:01.4]

FT: How did you become a beverage entrepreneur? Did you fall in to this or was this something that you had a laser sharp focus on for a while?

[0:04:12.1]

CW: Well, it actually was a college dorm room idea and I went to George Washington University down in DC and I was also involved in my fraternity and I was a social chairman, we would have some great parties and lots of good ideas come from frat parties. We'd have great parties where we have lots of jungle juice and this actually was born from that and evolved into something much bigger.

Because at the same time I was working at the Jefferson Hotel which is a boutique hotel, it's small, 99 room hotel that I was the assistant concierge at. My future business partner was consulting for the hotel as a beverage consultant to design their bar program and his bars that he's consulted for have actually won best bar worldwide, best bar of of Europe and he has been nominated for Perfect Barman of Paris, he's quite an acclaimed guy and I'm honored that he is now my business partner.

I floated the idea over to him to creating something that would make it a little bit easier to make great cocktails. So the idea was more towards the college market originally and he thought it was great. He came up with some recipes and we started doing some testing, we thought we'd try them with some sample groups and see what kind of feedback we got.

So we brought out our couple of different groups together and when we found the feedback was, "This is great, this is an awesome drink. Really good product but this is not for college students, this is something we'd have in a five star hotel or a very fine restaurant." It's good but it's different from what your original ideas so we just ran with that and we thought hey, let's work with really nice hotels, we're working in one right now so let's feed off of that and focus on high end bars restaurants, hotels and that's where we started doing.

[0:06:25.8]

FT: Okay, I'm going to go a little Shark Tank on you now because I love that show, don't you love that show?

[0:06:30.3]

CW: I love that show, I'm an addict for it as well as The Profit.

[0:06:35.6]

FT: The Profit, yeah, I met the Profit the other day. I'm doing a show on CNBC in March and I got a chance to meet Marcus Lemonis, such a nice man, he welcomed me into the family, I felt so loved, it was like the best it could have gone. Because I'm meeting him and I'm kind of nervous, I don't know what to do, I want to get a picture and he looks at me and he goes, "Let's take a picture." He just read my mind, I was like, "Yes please, thank you, I love you."

[0:07:06.5]

CW: Yeah, he seems like such a genuine guy.

[0:07:08.8]

FT: He really is, he deserves all of his success. Tell me a little bit about the back end of this business. What are you doing to keep your cost low, how are you bootstrapping this, where are you in terms of the money stage right now at this business?

[0:07:25.7]

CW: Right. This business was started in college but we didn't have — a beverage business can be expensive even on a shoe string budget. So we didn't really have the resources to really go 100% into this so my partner's name is Massi — Massimiliano. He continued to do his beverage consulting and I went into real estate and putting aside some money here and there, we were

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able to get enough to a little bit of a bootstrapped operation where we found an incubator kitchen and we're producing small batches on the weekends or late at night and then one day we actually received an order for several thousand bottles and this was...

[0:08:17.1]

FT: For who?

[0:08:18.9]

CW: It was a company that sells it in boxes to its customers, it's one of those box models.

[0:08:28.7]

FT: Oh right.

[0:08:29.3]

CW: Similar to Birch Box but another one. Great guys and we were super excited about this opportunity and the only thing is we're also a little bit hesitant because we would have to submit, we'd have to get our products, the several thousand bottles to them within three weeks and at this point we had very basic...

[0:08:53.2]

FT: Fake it till you make it baby.

[0:08:54.6]

CW: Yeah.

[0:08:56.3]

FT: "Oh yeah, we can do that, I'm on top of that Rose."

[0:08:59.6]

CW: Yeah. They actually gave us half of the money upfront so that was able to fund our production and we're able to hire about 10 people to help us out and it actually ended up being a huge disaster but I'll save that story for maybe later. It was what caused me to leave my job. So I thought, "Hey, we have our 6,000 bottle order, not going to be able to be running..."

[0:09:33.6]

FT: How much per bottle were you demanding at that point on the manufacturing side?

[0:09:39.3]

CW: How much were we charging?

[0:09:41.3]

FT: Yes.

[0:09:42.0]

CW: We were going to be charging I think it was four or \$5 a bottle.

[0:09:47.5]

FT: So that's 3,000 bottles.

[0:09:51.9]

CW: We were manufacturing 6,000.

[0:09:54.4]

FT: Oh sorry, 6,000 bottles \$4 a pop, that's \$24,000 and that was the confidence that you have to leave your job?

[0:10:01.3]

CW: Yup.

[0:10:04.1]

FT: More power to you.

[0:10:06.4]

CW: Yeah, no I remember sitting there and thinking. This is definitely a very monumental moment where I have a very stable job, I'm super happy where I am in real estate. Lots of opportunity for the future but how often do you get a shot at going full-in to your business and at this age, you're much better off going for something when you have a little more time to recover if you fail.

I thought, "Maybe I can come back to real estate if this doesn't work out but I'm going to go full force into this and hope that it does based on just our good products and hard work and good work ethic." And we manufactured everything and it didn't work out exactly as we wanted so we had to take some steps back and reassess everything but we moved forward and became stronger and a much more sustainable business after that.

[0:11:18.3]

FT: I see these as two different markets, you've got the alcohol lovers, the drink lovers and then you have the people who go for the all-natural stuff, the juice cleanses. Those two worlds, do they really collide?

[0:11:30.6]

CW: We think they do, we think they intersect at a point between mixology and the juice trend which we all know everyone's going crazy for their cold pressed juices. Actually our products are similar to the juice press, the cold press products but a little bit different..

We make all natural juice blends so often the ingredients are blended instead of pressed which is, there's actually a technical difference between the two. And they are actually made shelf stable, we have a very sensitive flash pasteurization process which allows us to make our products shelf stable.

So you as an individual at home or a bar manager, you're able to have your products and use them when it makes sense for you. So if you had a fresh juice at home as a cocktail mixer then you need to have that party or have those cocktails within the next three days otherwise it would spoil.

[0:12:34.5]

FT: Right. That's smart. How did you come up with the name, the American Juice Company? Why not come up with something different like, I dunno? Like invent a name for your company as some many companies do?

[0:12:47.3]

CW: Yeah, we spent a lot of time thinking about the name and then it just hit me that we were in DC, which is the capital and I've been working at the Jefferson hotel and all of this influences made that name just pop into my mind and I thought, "Wow, there has to be a company that already has this, probably the first American juice company probably has the name."

So I checked and it was available and I thought, "This is great," and it also plays into our goal which is to democratize the craft cocktail. You can go to a bar and you can pay \$15 or \$20 for a really great cocktail but that's not available at all bars and it's not easy to make at home which is why it's so difficult to enjoy a nice cocktail at home, you can't source lemon verbena and some

fresh orange, lemon and ginger and this and that. So we just made the name to reflect what we're doing, we're democratizing craft cocktail.

[0:13:52.9]

FT: What is the future of the American Juice Company, where are you guys headed towards in 2016? What's the next phase?

[0:14:00.5]

CW: The first two years of business, we were focused on making an association with ourselves with the best bars and restaurants in the world. So we built the relationship with Danny Myers Restaurant Group, Mandarin Oriental, we've worked with Daniel Boulud and a handful of other places that are really exceptional locations and then we chose our most successful products and just at the start of last summer, we finalized our packaging for consumer products and we went into retail.

At the start of last summer we entered retail and we're now in about a 150 locations and we're in whole foods and New York and Kings and New Jersey. We're really just getting the wheels started right now and we've entered UNFI, the largest distributor in the United States. KeHE, we're looking to build stronger relationships with those distributors and get some national distribution going.

[0:15:07.9]

FT: You are working around the clock I imagine because I don't think you have a big staff yet.

[0:15:13.0]

CW: That's right, we have a very small staff, we just brought on a new sales manager who is out connecting with our current accounts, actually also worked with us at the Jefferson hotel in DC, She's a hospitality person and we're all working around the clock to spread the juice.

[0:15:34.2]

FT: I'm so impressed because I find that when you're in college, you're focused on getting the job when you graduate, any job, some job, hopefully they'll get a job and then there are a few who look at opportunities differently, they look at, "How can I create something that's my own?" And without the experience and without any context, how did you have the — again, it's not courage but it's like the confidence really to say I can do this, I want to do this, I'm going to give this my best shot at such a young age too. You were still in college, it was dorm room idea, frat party idea, jungle juice, I drank a lot of jungle juice in college. Why didn't I have this idea? Why you? This is my question, why you Chris?

[0:16:20.8]

CW: Well, I was a rower in high school and I was recruited to row in college and there's a pretty unique mindset that you're required to have as rower which is you just go really, really hard and you really — there's nothing else to it except just giving your best possible effort in anything you do. And if you give that best effort and most of the time, things will work out.

And that is actually — that's my perspective, my mantra on life is that you need to give your best possible shot and that's all you can do, you can't really control all the variables but I wanted to start my own business, I had read a lot of books about Steve Jobs and lots of different entrepreneurs and I had worked in college at the Jefferson and another job.

So I had some income experience and I realized that I wanted to do something new, push the boundary, make something that was my own and something that reflected my values. So something that was really good quality, something that made people enjoy themselves more and that's kind of where we are. That's what led me to it.

[0:17:41.8]

FT: Some people would also — even with that mindset, some people would still hit a stumbling block which is, "How am I going to afford this? How am I going to get this off the ground? I'm just a young person, I don't have enough money to even buy myself dinner some nights?"

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[SPONSOR BREAK]

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:18:59.4]

FT: How do you start a business with little to no income?

[0:19:04.7]

CW: It's definitely an art because when you read all these things about startups and watch the movies, it's easy to get a little bit naïve about it and think that start up means success and that you're going to be getting this huge million dollar investments or tens of thousands if you're watching Shark Tank but in reality, it really comes down to finding a way to be able to keep your lights on so that you can keep the dream alive and move onto the next growth step where your goal is to get someone interested in it.

Get your sustainability up so we can actually have customers to sustain yourself and then attract people to your business so that it can grow with growth capital. We started the business spending the small dollars that we had made and saved up for this with the intention of learning first and then getting other people's money after we've learned and worked out the kinks. That learning experience with that order was a very costly in terms of dollars, learning experience.

On the larger scheme, it's not a huge amount of money but relative to what we had, it was a very big learning experience and we were forced to become a lot more disciplined and ask ourselves in every step of our business, "Is this working towards our goal? Is this investment, is this event, is this any expenditure we're spending, how is this going to get us closer to our goal?" So just getting really down and disciplined as a result of losing our own money was a really good learning experience.

[0:21:06.3]

FT: Just keeping the lights on, bare bones and you can buy yourself dinner later.

[0:21:12.4]

CW: Exactly. There's a good line from Herjavec on Shark Tank. He says, "The company needs to eat before you do." I agree with that. I think if you want your dream to develop and grow, you need to put everything you have into it.

[0:21:32.3]

FT: What's your financial philosophy, your personal financial philosophy? So business aside, how do you think about money in your personal life? What's your mantra?

[0:21:42.5]

CW: My personal mantra is, there's two, there's the more personal one which is to give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift which is Steve Prefontaine, he's an Olympic runner in

the 60's, I think 70's. Then the other one is exactly what I said before, how is — asking myself, "How is this investment or expense going to get me closer to my company's goals?"

So basically just being really disciplined and learning from our mistake and not being realistic about our budget, we actually hired a really good branding and PR agency early on, we did all these things before we even knew how to properly manufacture our products, we were sponsoring events. And all these things that you think are fun or good for your brand but in reality, you need to be focused on keeping the lights on. And is this going to allow you to go to the next step?

[0:22:49.2]

FT: What were you like as a kid and how did your experience with money, your introduction to money influence you as an adult? What's your biggest money memory as a kid?

[0:23:02.5]

CW: I still sometimes think of myself as a kid. I'm a pretty young guy, I guess my most recent, probably most impactful money experience is from high school and college and my family I'm fortunate that they're not struggling. There wasn't a really tight — we didn't have a tight financial situation because of struggle but my parents were very disciplined and being really tight about our allowance or any spending that we would do.

And so I was actually, I kind of forcing myself to go work and find a way to loosen the financial seatbelt. So that's what kind of led me to early on working at a store or working at the hotel and kind of building that independence on my own. So if you ask my parents or friends, I'd say I'm a pretty independent or self-starting guy.

[0:24:15.8]

FT: You said that there were some failure early on, so let's just get right to it. What's your number one failure? Either as an entrepreneur, as a young entrepreneur or as just a young guy who is managing his money and learning along the way?

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[0:24:32.4]

CW: Yeah, so maybe the opportunity to tell you that that story in more depth.

[0:24:39.8]

FT: Please.

[0:24:41.4]

CW: The one I touched on. It's a great story. So yeah, we had this huge order and we're all optimistic and excited about it, we talked it over as a team that we're going to all participate and we're going to — here is our timeline of sourcing of ingredients, our bottles. Each element of the production and we would get this first half done by this day and then this day and we would have one week early to be able to just kind of assess where we are and make sure nothing went wrong.

We sure enough hired, we used the website TaskRabbit, we hired about 10 people, we had the most basic equipment, so we're literally sourcing fruits and vegetables, we're not doing any of that concentrate or frozen things or anything like that. We literally had hundreds of mangoes that needed to be peeled, diced and have the core removed and so we had cavemen tools where we had a lineup of about five people who are on the peeling side and they pass it on to the chopping and then gets blended, combined with pineapple and a few other things.

And this went on from morning, so at 7 AM it would start and it would end at midnight and there would be different shifts of people. I'd be there making sure that the new people that came in, the new TaskRabbits would be fitting right into their ford production line and be able to do their test. One person's job was just to cap bottles. One person's job is just to — we're applying labels by hand as well at this point. Sure enough, we did fulfil 6,000 bottles and a couple of days go buy and we go to the taste one of them and it's ready to ship out, we have like...

[0:26:49.3]

FT: Oh god. I feel like we're at the turning point.

[0:26:51.2]

CW: Yeah, exactly. We go to taste them, actually, lots of friends we're helping out as well, they were saints, they were real troopers. And we go to taste one just to enjoy the fruits of our labor and there's little carbonation in it. We're like, "Hmm, does that taste a little funny?" And he passed it to me and I'm like, "Maybe it's just this one, let me see the other."

[0:27:17.4]

FT: You don't want to believe it.

[0:27:19.9]

CW: We opened another one and you hear a little "tshh" and you open it and you taste it and you're like, "Well maybe it's just this box." And you open one from different box and sure enough, the whole thing had fermented and we're sitting there thinking, "Oh my god, how did this happen?" I'm in crisis mode, deciding what are the variables that could have gone wrong here?

We have one week, are we able to execute again in one week, redo everything and fulfill this order and not make any profit but just fulfil the order and that would be good. Save faced and get our products out to all these people. I speak with the cap company, I speak with the bottle company and there was a miscommunication between one person and another, which meant that they had given us the wrong caps.

We decided, "Okay, this has to have been the variable that caused this whole thing to go wrong," and sure enough, I decide we're going to execute again because as I said, you got to go full force, give your best effort and we decided we're going to do it. I speed up the production, we're going to work around the clock and we're going to get this done in two days and we're going to be ready to ship.

We will push back the delivery date just a little bit for transit time but we're going to get it done. Sure enough we go round two and we have the same lineup of all the people and we do a huge production and it's all ready to go, it ships out and we're super relieved...

[0:29:18.5]

FT: Who did you fire right away?

[0:29:23.1]

CW: There was no one to fire at this point, they were all — everyone was a TaskRabbit. They were just...

[0:29:28.7]

FT: That's right, oh my goodness. How would you have done that differently? How is it that the communication was done improperly? What would you have been able to change?

[0:29:43.1]

CW: Well, we could have changed — the story actually doesn't end there, it actually gets even worse because that shipment ended up fermenting as well and that's because our variables, there was another variable, which is there was a piece of equipment that was not calibrated properly, these products were not being properly sterilized, they weren't being — it wasn't shelf stable. That's why it was fermenting and...

[0:30:13.6]

FT: How was that discovered?

[0:30:15.1]

CW: That was discovered after the fact by the equipment — we were working at an incubator, at a place. That's how that got discovered but it was...

[0:30:30.9]

FT: Was it too late, were they already in the monthly boxes?

[0:30:33.9]

CW: No, it shipped there and we were fortunate enough to be able to tell them not to send it out to anybody and so we saved everybody and...

[0:30:44.0]

FT: That could have been a big problem.

[0:30:44.9]

CW: Yeah, that would have been really bad. We were able to save that and really just sit down and absorb what happened, learn from it and realize that we needed to make sure nothing like that ever happened again.

[0:31:03.1]

FT: How did the company take it? The vendor?

[0:31:06.7]

CW: They were definitely very upset since they had all of their customers expected this to be received and also we made sure to return their deposit as well and yeah, it was just a sour note to leave on for everybody. A really big opportunity to kick things off and prove we could do this and work super hard just went the opposite way.

[0:31:38.4]

FT: All right, that was a terrible story.

[0:31:40.9]

CW: Yeah.

[0:31:43.3]

FT: And you're like, "But wait, there's more."

[0:31:46.1]

CW: No, I promise that's the end.

[0:31:47.1]

FT: It didn't even — my gosh. Well, glad things are now working out for you and I guess these are the growing pains that you can only discover and that hopefully you will discover early on in the phase of developing a business. I'm going to skip your So Money moment because I want to talk about habits with you. As someone who has always had an entrepreneurial vision and drive, what's a financial habit that you practiced that helps you with your money that also then supports your entrepreneurial endeavors?

[0:32:19.8]

CW: I use Quickbooks. So Quickbooks is, I'm sure you're familiar with the software for tracking your expenditures and it connects directly with your banks so you're able to see a transaction directly going into the software and you can sort it into what category it falls into. So for personal and for business purposes, it's a necessary tool and it allows you to actually be aware of how much money you're spending on having beers or food or laundry or whatever your personal

expenses are. Or in your business, keeping everything really tightly sorted which is necessary to keep on financial track, stay with your budget.

[0:33:11.8]

FT: All right, let's do some So Money fill in the blanks, are you ready Chris?

[0:33:16.1]

CW: I am.

[0:33:17.0]

FT: Yeah, you've been waiting for this your whole life. If I won the lottery tomorrow, let's say, \$100 million bucks, the first thing I would do is _____.

[0:33:26.1]

CW: Invest in real estate and other startup companies.

[0:33:30.9]

FT: You still want to go back to your real estate roots one day?

[0:33:34.1]

CW: I think real estate is probably one of the best investments out there. I would definitely want to stay involved in real estate, yeah.

[0:33:45.3]

FT: When I splurge, I like to buy X because _____.

[0:33:51.9]

CW: I like to buy — when I splurge, I like to buy really good food.

[0:34:01.2]

FT: Really good food. Are you a health nut? You started this juice company. Is that very much in line with your eating habits or philosophy on food?

[0:34:14.0]

CW: No, I like good — my definition of good food is often not the healthiest but something like a good bacon egg and cheese, I good steak.

[0:34:29.0]

FT: I could eat that all day, I could eat that lunch, breakfast, dinner, and midnight snack. I love an egg and cheese sandwich, that's good.

[0:34:38.2]

CW: Or a good pasta or a good fish. That would be my splurge.

[0:34:46.5]

FT: One thing that makes my life easier or better is?

[0:34:51.2]

CW: This is definite Shyp. Have you ever heard of the app called Shyp?

[0:34:55.8]

FT: Oh yeah, Shyp. I use them occasionally, they're excellent.

[0:34:59.6]

CW: It's amazing, this is like...

[0:35:02.1]

FT: You use them to ship your beverages, your bottles?

[0:35:04.7]

CW: Yeah, when we're shipping out samples or things directly to customers, we'll often use shyp because with something that's glass and fragile, they do a really good job of keeping everything well packed and not breaking.

[0:35:21.4]

FT: When I was growing up, the one thing I wish I had learned about money is _____.

[0:35:27.8]

CW: I would say, respecting a dollar.

[0:35:32.5]

FT: Respecting a dollar. You don't think you respect...

[0:35:34.9]

CW: Yeah, how hard it is to make a dollar. I learned that, yeah, through working.

[0:35:40.9]

FT: When I donate, I like to give to _____ because _____.

[0:35:45.9]

CW: I'd have to go with Central Park Conservancy as a New Yorker.

[0:35:50.3]

FT: Were you raised here?

[0:35:51.9]

CW: I was raised here, yes. I'm a big lover of central park and I donate very small amount at this stage but hopefully can donate more in the future.

[0:36:04.6]

FT: I wonder if your big apple upbringing, because there's so much entrepreneurial infusion here in the city, if that contributed to your perspective on work and life as a kid?

[0:36:20.6]

CW: Yeah, I think so. I mean I grew up here until high school so after eighth grade I went to high school in Connecticut and then down to DC. Yeah, I mean New York is a place where people hustle. So I think that's the stereotype.

[0:36:42.2]

FT: That's a good way to put it. It's a hustling town.

[0:36:44.7]

CW: Yeah, definitely something that's ingrained in me.

[0:36:47.3]

FT: Last but not least, I'm So Money because _____.

[0:36:52.4]

CW: I'd say, I'm more I'm honored to be a young entrepreneur right now at such a pivotal point and not only technology but also health and wellness.

[0:37:03.4]

FT: And adult beverages.

[0:37:04.5]

CW: Yeah, exactly.

[0:37:05.7]

FT: Even though you don't manufacture that but that's kind of the idea, the hope that this will be — and if even if you don't drink, you can make a virgin American juice cocktail.

[0:37:16.0]

CW: Exactly, a cocktail.

[0:37:18.7]

FT: Chris Worth, thank you so much, it's been really great to hear your story, very inspiring, congratulations on your growth and wishing you all the best with all the goals you have for the company this year, hopefully no more TaskRabbit snafu's.

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[0:37:37.6]

CW: No.

[0:37:39.1]

FT: We're fans of TaskRabbit at So Money but sometimes you just — it happens.

[0:37:43.6]

CW: Yeah, exactly. Learning experiences.

[0:37:46.3]

FT: Thanks so much.

[0:37:47.1]

CW: Thank you Farnoosh, I appreciate you having me on the show and looking forward to speaking again soon.

[END]