

Business Beyond Borders Episode #11 – Alicia Navarro

Presenter: Cynthia Dearin

Guest: Alicia Navarro

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Cynthia Dearin: So Alicia it is great to have you on the show today.

Alicia Navarro: Lovely to be here Cynthia.

Cynthia Dearin: I want to know, did you always think you were going to be an entrepreneur?

Alicia Navarro: I did, I am one of those odd creatures that it had been my dream. Well I wanted to be a spaceship captain and an air traffic control pilot or a businesswoman because back then I did not know the word entrepreneur. So it seems like I was just destined to boss people around, basically.

Cynthia Dearin: Why was that, do you think?

Alicia Navarro: I think I was always a geek. It is funny because I think there is so much of a push to try and get women into technology as if it does not actually come to them but you know, my sister and I were brought up in the same way, but I was just drawn to technology. When we bought a Commodore 64 for the family I am the one that just dived into it and taught myself how to code at 10 years old, whenever my parents had left over the long toilet roll, I would turn it into a She-ra sword and run around in my back yard pretending to press the buttons or I create spaceship control, things out of arts and crafts. I was drawn to the idea that you could deal with problems and challenges by being calm and being a leader. I think probably because I loved books and fictions and fairytales and so I was always drawn to this idea of being the hero and the hero took control of situations and many of the books that I was reading growing up were set in a sci-fi fantasy world and so technology naturally started to form a part of that.

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- Cynthia Dearin: So your career choice was informed by the fact that you like to be in control, you think that is fair?
- Alicia Navarro: I don't think that was a conscious choice but now on retrospective reflection it seems like it is a commonality amongst all the ambitions I had as a child.
- Cynthia Dearin: Alright. So I know a little later on when you were a teenager you were part of a thing called Young Achievers. And for people who do not know what that is I think it is fair to say that it is an organization that teaches and mentors young people to help them create their own businesses. Would that be fair?
- Alicia Navarro: Yes, young people get put into teams and then they go through the complete life cycle of starting, running and in the end dissolving a company and distributing the proceeds that were invested. And so I did that as a very geeky/nerdy shy girl, got voted the managing director of my little company, which no one had ever voted for me, I was not a popular child. Then we came up with a business idea, which was my initial idea, lip-gloss. We manufactured it and sold it to both men and women.
- Cynthia Dearin: What did you make the lip-gloss out of?
- Alicia Navarro: Vaseline with colouring and scent, basically. And we won we made the most profit in the year and we won venture of the year and that was the start of my addiction with entrepreneurship.
- Cynthia Dearin: So how do you think Young Achievers influenced what you went on to do?
- Alicia Navarro: I think it gave me a taste of the fact that I didn't have to be the popular blond girl at school to be good at being a leader and that being a leader didn't mean actually bossing people around, what I did as the leader was always set the example. So if there is going to be a weekend where we were manufacturing the lip-gloss, I was the first one in and the last one out. I was the one working the hardest, I was the one doing the [inaudible 3:56] jobs because that is what a leader does, that showed me the kind of leader that I wanted to be.
- Cynthia Dearin: Now these days you run Skimlinks, but Skimlinks was not your first business, is that right? I mean apart from lip-gloss, there a couple of things that came before Skimlinks. So can you tell me, you did Young Achievers, fast forward, you did Computer Science and you won the University Medal, what happened after that and what businesses did you start?

- Alicia Navarro: I mean, many, it is funny to look back and recognize these patterns retrospectively, but I was a fountain of ideas and some of them I would follow through more than others. For a while I started heading holidays which was clubbing holidays from Ibiza to Australia which very quickly I realized that the travels agents licence and a lot of capital which was never going to work as a business, I think it was something I enjoyed ta the time. Then I started Fun and Fearless Computing which was complete computing solutions for senior citizens and it turned out again I had no money, no knowledge of how to market anything and after three months of working on this full time, I even quit my job to do this, I recognized I did not know enough, or have enough capital to make that a success. What I always do is whenever I fail at a business idea I go back and say "What was the skill I was lacking?" and then I would get a job that would expose me to the skills to fill that gap. I just kept trying, and there were tons of other ideas that I played around with, without quitting my job. And it is also the idea today, there is nothing more fun for me than coming up with an idea and writing a high level business plan.
- Cynthia Dearin: You are a classic entrepreneur. Always coming up with the next cool idea. Now tell me, Skimlinks was something else and then it became Skimlinks, is that right?
- Alicia Navarro: Yes, Skimlinks was the third pivot of a business I started. Basically when I started this company it began as a social shopping site, something very similar to Pinterest, well it was not as pretty as Pinterest in fact, reasonably ugly. So I built that with a team of developers that I hired in Romania while I was in Sydney at the time.
- Cynthia Dearin: How did you do that? What year was this?
- Alicia Navarro: This was 2006.
- Cynthia Dearin: Were Romanian developers the thing that they are now? Because now anybody can pick up a Romanian developer by going to Freelance or Upwork, but 2006 how did you actually do that?
- Alicia Navarro: Well there was the equivalent site at the time, but this particular company was used by a good friend of mine who is now is my co-founder. He had used this company for another one of his projects and introduced us. It was a personal recommendation. At the time I was working full time, so I basically got home at night and Romania was just waking up so I would work from 8:00PM to midnight every night and I would work weekends, I did that for about a year. Then eventually I had this website, called Skimbit, which is a terrible name,

and it was around that time that I knew I had to do something about it, like raise money, I did not have any more money left on my own so I tried to get Australian VCs to invest in it. There was one that was investing in tech start-ups.

Cynthia Dearin: Even today, we only have about 25 in the whole country so that is not very surprising to me.

Alicia Navarro: Exactly, and the pitch phase is basically pitch, he said “No” and I was like “That’s Australia for me.” When I tell this story, I think not many non-Australians get it that I did what every Australian would do in this scenario and I was like, “Well I will go travel for a bit.” I took 6 weeks off work and just went backpacking to try and find the answer. As it turns out, I did, I popped back into London where I had been living for some years previously and caught up with other entrepreneur friends and they gave me an inspiration which was, “Look you go this kind of social shopping site that is a B2C proposition but how about if you make it into a white label version of that website and licence it to other websites? So essentially make it into a B2B proposition. And by the way, I’ve got a potential wedding website that might be a good first client, and I also got a these people that might give you free desk space as an accelerator.” So, I was like on holidays. I was wearing flip flop and shorts and suddenly I am having to borrow a friend’s clothes to go to a meeting, I had to call my developers in Romania and say “ We got three days to do working prototype so I can demo product that we haven’t even built yet. I had to whip out PowerPoint and create a presentation for a product that didn’t even exist yet. I went into this winning website and pitched a complete fabrication but they loved it. On the basis of that, they ended up paying me a huge chunk of money upfront and a subscription for the rest of the year. And on the basis of that I was like , “Wow, it seems I accidentally have a business” I remember vividly, it was like August the 18th or something, and within a month I had gone back to Australia, sold my car, sold my furniture, gave up my apartment, quit my job, said goodbye to my weeping mother and friends, build the product from scratch and returned to London to be a fulltime penniless entrepreneur at the age of 30.

Cynthia Dearin: Where was your co-founder all this time?

Alicia Navarro: It was just me for the first couple of years

Cynthia Dearin: Were you Skimlinks at that point, or where you Skimbit?

Alicia Navarro: That was just how we became Skimbit. It was just me on my own and I was trying to get other clients like this wedding website to licence its technology, I was out there pitching every day being told "No." This is now 2008 now and the world is starting to slide into global recession and I am starting to realize that if it is this hard to get money early, on it is going to get harder and harder. I started thinking of other revenue models, and I was just constantly tweaking and refining my business because every time I would pitch to an investor I saw it as free management consulting advice. Which is a nice way of handling rejection. I would take that advice and pivot, pivot, pivot. The big pivot came when I brought in my friend from university, Joe, who was doing his own business doing internet marketing stuff. And I was like look, I need help, I need a new revenue model, can you help me come up with something? So together, we came up with this other form of monetization because people were using our site to bookmark products that they wanted to buy from other retailers, and a lot of these other retailers had affiliate programs which is where you would get paid a commission for referring a sale. The problem is, to make affiliate links was still an entirely manual process and you had to sign up for all these affiliate networks, of which they were many and then you had to sign up to each retailer's affiliate program, wait to be approved, then you would have to manually construct these affiliated deep links, which were often very technical and error prone. Then you would have to manually paste them into your site and keep them updated and then log into to a load of different interfaces to aggregate your performance. So what I was discovering was that no one outside of coupon code or deal sites were bothering with affiliate marketing as a publisher, as a content creator, and we for ourselves invented our own way of automatically monetizing our user generated content using affiliate marketing and I found that when I was pitching to investors or potential customers, this great new shopping site, more of them were interested in this unsexy way that we were making money, than in the actual social shopping functionality. And so, it was like in the depths of 2008 that I realized I am about to run out of money, I have been doing this for two years, I am sick of being penniless and stressed and lonely. So I asked Joe to be my cofounder and we pivoted the business again and we dumped everything I had done in the last two years and instead made this monetization technology that we built for ourselves, able to run on other websites so it was suddenly a way that other websites could monetize their own content using affiliate marketing.

Cynthia Dearin: How did you feel about dumping everything you had done? What was that like, as a sensation?

- Alicia Navarro: You know, it is funny people ask that as if it was a hard decision that was very traumatic but you have to understand that at this point in time I was in survival mode, I am on adrenaline mode, can't sleep at night desperate to do anything. I mean at that stage I probably would have done anything to survive. And if it meant dumping two years of stuff, I think it didn't even register at the time, it was like obviously this is the thing I need to do and it worked. I was able to go back to every single one of the publishers that I had been pitching the social shopping functionality to and said "Hey remember me, you hated what I was selling you before but how about this? Which actually just makes you money and it is very easy." To my delight a ton of people said yes, and I went back to all the investors that had said no to me and said "Hey I am back, I am not doing this instead of that, do you like this? By the way we have tons of clients already and are making tons of money already. And they said, "Yeah, here is the money" After a year of trying we ended up closing our seed round in record time and we were the only deal being done, this was a day after Lehman Brothers collapsed, and we were the only deal being done in the world probably at the worst point in the recession. So yes, from the doors of death we were saved.
- Cynthia Dearin: I want to say that displays a remarkable amount of resilience to be able to pull up from that and just turn around and just go "Ok, that didn't work out, we are going to start over."
- Alicia Navarro: I mean, yes and it is easy to mythologize it in retrospect but at the time, I am a product person by background, so my job comes instinctively is talk to customers, do you like what I am doing? If they don't, tweak it. "Do you like this now?" No? Then tweak it, and so to me it just seemed like a very natural process of testing the market and finding out what worked and iterating until I did.
- Cynthia Dearin: I was going to ask you what your vision for Skimlinks was, back when you started it, but maybe what I want to ask you I was, did you actually have a vision for Skimlinks back when you started it or where you just in survival mode and just did that vision really evolve after you to out of survival mode and had time to think about what was going to come next?
- Alicia Navarro: I think that in the end they were two very different businesses, so when I first started the company it was like "It was meant to be" a Pinterest type solution, so my vision at the time was making decisions, group decisions, easy. Now we are a completely different company, now we are all about helping publishers make money from their content in ways that are not annoying, that was our vision back then and it is still our vision today.

- Cynthia Dearin: Does that answer the questions, what does Skimlinks do?
- Alicia Navarro: Yes. I can answer that in all sorts of techy and non-techy ways. At its most basic, yes we help publishers like BuzzFeed and Conde Nast and The New York Times, etc. Help them get paid for the products that they write about without having to use annoying ads or interrupt the user experience. So we are used now on four and a half million websites around the world, a billion users a month visit websites that we work with, we drive about a billion dollars worth of e-commerce sales through our platform every year. For the more tech-y people what we do is automate affiliate marketing for publishers so that they get the revenue and they get the insights on the buying behaviours of their readers which they then can influence what they can write about.
- Cynthia Dearin: Now I want to come back in a moment to your clients and your ideal clients, but before we do that I just want to stay that from the early days in Skimlinks for a moment. I wonder if you could just kind of describe a typical day in the life of Alicia Navarro back around that time, when Lehman Brothers was collapsing, and you were doing the pivot and you were going out and pitching to people who said no in the past. What did that typical day look like for you if there was one?
- Alicia Navarro: In retrospect those were some of my favourite days because you do whatever it takes so there was no clear, this is my role this is your role. There was a group us, and by this stage I had about 4 people in the company and we did whatever was needed to get things forward. Some people were engineers so they were obviously better at engineering and I was better at selling but the truth of it was any of us would have done anything that was needed and so every day there was no meetings, there was none of this natural stuff that comes to become a bigger company. Those early days you have a goal, which is to survive and to build a product that works, that doesn't accidentally take your customer's site down, and that other people want to use as well. I was doing everything, all the selling, all the investor management, all the marketing, all the copywriting for the website, for the documentation, I was speaking, pitching, working with the engineers on product, it was whatever it took.
- Cynthia Dearin: And tell me about your early clients, we alluded to this before when you said you went back to and talk to people who said "No" once already. Tell me about how you went about actually getting those early clients.
- Alicia Navarro: I think it is a really interesting thing, a) What I was selling was really easy to sell because no one had to pay me money, I make you money. You basically have

to say yes and do nothing else differently and you would earn extra money. As far as product that you sell goes, it was a really easy sell. However, you did have to install us on your site. So if you were the Telegraph for example and you are installing Skimlinks on your site, that is a big ask, because we are a young company with young engineers and we could bring your site down, and we did once, you know, so that was hard but the way that we did it, the way that I did it, and this became a core mantra at Skimlinks is that you are not just selling a product you are selling yourself. I don't mean that in a prostitute kind of way, I mean that in like people are buying into you and the faith that they have in you, so I poured every bit of sincerity and earnestness and passion into every pitch that I did so that they were like, "Jesus, we are going to give this person a chance because you can't say no to her." What was interesting was, I often became close friends with my early clients because they weren't just my clients they were people that were just like "Let's give her a shot" and to this day I have gone to weddings of early clients, I hang out with my early clients, they became very close friends. But what they also do then is that they also introduce you to other people, if they like you. You would say, "Do you know anyone else?" and generally they know other people within their space and so that was how we got a lot of our early clients. Also, and this is kind of an interesting point for people based outside the US, I was based in London at the time and the great thing about London, is that everyone that is anyone is based in London. I was able to, for the price of a weekly tube pass, physically visit every single one of my clients and sit in front of them and have them look into my eyes and see that I was never going to let them down. So I was able to win those early clients because it was affordable to do face-to-face meetings. What I was then able to do was then leverage and say look, "Hey, Hearst Publishing, I am glad that you love us. Would you mind introducing us to your US parent company?" and so I would then talk to the US company and say "Hey we are already running on your UK sites, how about you work with us?" And so it became very easy for us to expand to the US using that strategy and within probably the first six months more than 50% of our business was in the US.

Cynthia Dearin: That is a great segue about what I wanted to ask you next, which was, when did you decide to take Skimlinks international? So it sounds like it was after six months.

Alicia Navarro: I think it was immediate. The thing with Skimlinks particularly is that it was not a geographically based company. On day one you can sign up for us on the website and we would work irrespective to where you were based. So we had a lot of good publicity in an industry magazine, probably a couple of months after we launched and as a result of that one article, and I remember vividly it was a page six footer article, it was not a very big article, but it was how

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basically that the Daily Mail had started using Skimlinks. As a result of that we ended up winning a ton of big clients in the US that were huge, they just read about it, went to our website, signed up and put us live. I mean, they didn't even talk to us before they did it. So I was visiting the US to talk to clients, within the first six months. And that, again is the great thing, we did not have to actually sell to anyone, we just had to say "Hey we are here, you can sign up look at all the customers that are already using us, just sign up at the website and you can make yourself go live at any time." Within the first year I was probably every quarter spending a good chunk of time in the US.

Cynthia Dearin: Ok so we were talking about Skimlinks' international expansion and I wanted to ask, in talking about when you decided you wanted to take Skimlinks international and saying that you knew from the start that you could be an internationally company, but was there a moment when it suddenly became clear that was the path you were headed down?

Alicia Navarro: I don't think I ever thought, even on day one that we were just going to be a UK company, I think the beautiful thing about the internet is that there are no physical goods. Like our technology, our product is completely intangible, someone cannot even talk to another human being and be based in Antarctica and still use it. From day one there was no preconception that we were in any way just a local company. Our market was focused on the English-speaking world, and was predicated on the network and the affiliate networks, and the retailers that we had integrated. So we did focus on the US, and the UK through our primary markets because they were a) English speaking, b) sizeable and c) more sophisticated from a publishing and affiliate marketing perspective and eventually we did more across Europe and Asia Pacific but even up until this day I would say 75% of our business is across the US and the UK.

Cynthia Dearin: So if you just think of the process of that international expansion happening, you started in London by going to existing clients and getting them to use your product on another continent. Where did it go to from there? When did you suddenly go from having just an office in London to also a location in the States as well?

Alicia Navarro: Before we set up a physical presence in the US, I used a strategy of pretending I did. I would schedule sizeable, let's say four to six-week long trips every quarter, where I would just go mainly to San Francisco, LA and New York. I would just go see existing and potential clients as well as try to immerse myself in the local scene. My hypothesis was that if I did that regularly enough, they would start to see me as being physically present there. I learned very

quickly that particularly in the US that was important. The US is perhaps subconsciously quite xenophobic, or consciously, but for the most part even though unconsciously, they have this xenophobia that is quite instinctive to them. So I learned very quickly that while they consider my accent very exotic, you should always position yourself as being a regular here even if you weren't based there, and that would make a difference in whether they would want to do business with you or not. I did that for two years, in 2010, so two years after we started, and we set up physical shop. I think we incorporated in the US before we physically set up because we needed to for being paid by US suppliers, or rather the partners we were working with but in 2010 I physically moved over and we set up an office in San Francisco and I was based out of there for two and a half years.

Cynthia Dearin: At what point did you think, "Ok I am now ready to go back to London and let someone else run the operation out here?"

Alicia Navarro: When I started I did not think that would happen, when I moved over I thought that that was going to be "it" and I fell in love with San Francisco, it is a wonderful city. We hired people, we probably had about 10 or so people in our San Francisco office, and then we had the team back in London that was doing more of the product and R&D side of stuff and what I was doing was basically going back and forth between the two offices every month. Now, I do not know if you have done that trip but doing that flight every three weeks for two and a half years it started to really wear on me both sort of physically and mentally, and also the London office was getting bigger and bigger in terms of its people and it became really challenging to lead via a crappy Skype connection, especially with the kind of leader I am, is a very in-person gregarious warm one, being remote and not being able to physically be there for the people that I was trying to communicate with, was taking it's toll also on our interpersonal relationships within the team. By that stage I realized, we have a very solid team of people in the San Francisco office, they don't need me there, and maybe it is time that I go back to London. So with a heavy heart because by that stage I really loved San Francisco, I moved back to London and I was still traveling to the US regularly but by inverting that it took a lot of the pressure off me. I moved back in the beginning of 2013.

Cynthia Dearin: From the outside the Skimlinks story is, I have to say, I find it a very glamorous story, but as an entrepreneur I know that when you go about building a company there are usually some tough times that happen as well. I was wondering if you would just give me an insight into one of the challenging times that you faced as you grew the business from the UK to the US and beyond that, and how you dealt with whatever that challenge was.

Alicia Navarro: I mean there is so many. The problem is that a) there are so many how do you pick just one? and 2) you end up internalizing them so much that you stop remembering them as particularly traumatic because your general level of stress just gets so high that it becomes normal. I described it recently that it is like going into a Bikram yoga studio, you know when you begin it is really smelly but within 10 minutes you don't really smell it because you get used to it, that is what it is like.

Cynthia Dearin: Like the frog in the boiling water.

Alicia Navarro: Right you just get used to it. I was noticing that I was taking a lot of time off the day after I would come back from the US trip. I would just not be able to get out of bed, and I beat myself up because what a wuss, I was so weak but I just physically couldn't. I was just drained mentally and physically and that was starting to take its toll and I was lonely. You know it is really hard to have relationships or even develop friendships properly when you are not guaranteed to be around all the time and you spend a lot of time recovering and unpacking or packing. So that was the hard thing having your own personal and physical challenges while I was also trying to run a company and deal with competitors and industry challenges and so on. So moving back to London was a good thing, what we also then did was realise that San Francisco was the wrong place for us to have a US base as a UK headquartered company. It was eight hours time zone difference away, it was a 16, 13 hour flight and actually there weren't that many of our clients based in San Francisco most of them were in New York. So around 2015 we made the decision to move our US base from San Francisco to New York. Which made a tonne of sense, and frankly we should have just been based out of New York the whole time. That was really hard because we had an incredible team of people in San Francisco, who we also offered to relocate to New York, but they were all Californians and they did not want to so it was really hard to let go of people that were my friends and family at that stage but it was done very amicably and they understood. So now our New York office has 10 people and it is growing and it is a much more logical place for us to be based. The team there are out all the time visiting clients, talking to them, it is a much shorter timezone difference away you can pop into New York for a day if you want and it doesn't hurt you physically as much. It is very easy to collaborate, it is only five hours timezone in difference away and those different 3 hours make a world of difference. So I think the big lesson was think big and hard where you have your base because there are some places with certain glamour to them, San Francisco being one of them, the practicalities will play a bigger role later on and that was a big lesson.

- Cynthia Dearin: I think that is a great example. Now you were mentioning your team in New York and seeing Skimlinks clients. Who are those ideal clients for you these days and how did you and how do you figure out who these people are?
- Alicia Navarro: Our main clients are publishers, so large media companies, or content creators, mostly the big newspapers, the big content networks like Conde Nast, Hearst, Tonic, the big digital natives like BuzzFeed, AOL, Business Insider and then a long tail of smaller sites, content creation platforms, forums etc. So really any content creator that is talking about products or shopping in some way, naturally with an editorial content is a client or can be a client.
- Cynthia Dearin: To look at the flipside of that, as I understand it, you do not have many competitors in your space but the ones that you do have are extremely at large. What is your strategy for staying ahead of those competitors?
- Alicia Navarro: Well they are not. I think in terms of direct competitors that do the exact same thing as us there is like two and we are certainly and have the biggest and the best roster of customers. In terms of indirect competitors, you can argue Amazon is, but Amazon is also a client so the biggest competitor I guess is what we find is that when publishers become very successful using us and we start to deliver to them a significant amount of revenue sometimes, to get to that degree of revenue they have had to develop a certain degree of sophistication around their content creation and sort of internal operations and they start to think that they don't need us because they can do it themselves and that ends up being the biggest competitor which is how do we make sure we deliver enough value and save then enough money that they continue using us, rather than build their own internal operations to do it themselves.
- Cynthia Dearin: I like it. Tell me a little about the company culture - what is it and how do you do it?
- Alicia Navarro: It began very organically, so when I first started hiring people, my only employees, I knew we would be working really hard and long hours. So you want someone that you got along with and would have no ego and be willing to dive in and do whatever it took, so I hired people, and by the way we had no money, so we had to hire experienced people, we had to hire people that would be willing to learn, willing to help each other out and that would keep things light, when things were in a dark place. Those things became the kernels of our culture: learning, helping each other out, taking care of each other, and laughing along the way. Over the years as we got bigger that started to codify itself by what we call skim love, which was a really tacky and

silly thing. He had a silly habit of pre-fixing everything with the word skim so we didn't have interns, skimterns, we didn't have football we played Skimball, so #Skimlove became the way we would congratulate each other via our own internal comms like Yammer back then and Slack, when they congratulated each other on winning a client because of who we were and because we went out and went above and beyond what was required to get something done, to help a colleague out. And so very organically the team would use the #skimlove as a way to signify that someone had used their hearts, themselves and their passion to do something and win something. That very weirdly evolved into being our culture and as the years progressed I recognized it was time to codify a little more officially, and I ended up deconstruction the letters so they would reflect the values that were present in everyone that we looked for. So, "S" was sparkle; you know that fire in the eyes. "K: was kickass, were they talented and hard working?" "I" was inventive, do they love solving problems? "M" is master their domain, do they take initiative and do whatever it takes to get things done? "L" is likable; we don't like to hire dicks. "O" is opened minded because I am a female leader, we've got lesbians, we got age, are you open minded enough to appreciate diversity? "V" is vocal. Can you stand up and say "No, I do not agree, I got a better idea?" that has always been really encouraged and "E" is entrepreneurial; do you just love being part of this journey and love the process of building something with a group of people? So we ended up codifying it even further by creating a neon letter hashtag and hanging it on our kitchen. In fact now when you walk into our office, you don't see our company name, you see our culture name in neon letters as you walk in because that is how core to who we are it is. So you continue to codify that even further, when you hire, it becomes the values you weight people on during performance reviews, it becomes the awards that we give; every Friday night we give a kickass award, and it becomes a much more codified process to instil it into the culture and into how we hire and how we reward or what we punish. It is an incredibly important thing, and these days culture is a much more popular concept that it used to be, but back then I felt I was the only one talking about it and it has been really exciting to see that some of the early ideas and mantras that we kind of lived by, have become a lot more adopted, at least across the London scene.

Cynthia Dearin:

That is really cool and I would love if you could send me a picture of those neon letters so that I can include them in the email that will go out about this interview when we publish it a little while from now. I would love to see that. So just on you as a female leader, because one of the reasons I have got you on the podcast chatting to me right now, is because we are currently running the Girls Going Global campaign and one thing that I am really trying to do is highlight female entrepreneurs who have made an international success of their business to demonstrate to other people just how possible it is. Do you

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think it would be fair to say that your industry is pretty male-dominated and do you think that as you've have gone on to this international journey being female has been a help to you or has it been a hindrance?

Alicia Navarro:

Ok. I don't think it is male dominated, I think it is male populated. I think that and I can only speak of my own industry because that is the only one that I know very well, I feel it is very much a meritocracy, and that if you are good enough you are good enough, whether you are male or female. People just love people that are good and geeky and love what they do. It just happens to be that a lot of people that are good and are geeky and love technology happen to be men. There has never been, and I can honestly say this, been any hindrance or any disadvantage whatsoever with being a female in this industry. I topped my science degree, I worked all my life, I'm almost always the only woman in the room and I have never been treated with anything other than respect and given, if anything, advantages, rather than disadvantage because of my gender. I am remembered a lot more, it is much easier to approach people, I get a lot of help if I ask for it, it has been a boon in every single way and I think it is because I know my stuff and I can hold my own and I have never really felt that I am a woman in this space because I just happened to be a woman. I am very mindful of what my strengths and weaknesses are and as with anything I work to optimize my strengths and mitigate my weaknesses. I think that the things that make me good at what I do are that I am very empathetic, I am very warm and gregarious, and I am able to get people enthused and get people to trust me. You could argue, "Is that a gender-specific thing?" I do not know but they are some of the things I am good at and I optimize towards those in the work that I do. There are things I am not good at. I am not very good at the sort of the financial management, or operational management, so I hire a team of executives that are brilliant operators, executors and financiers and we work fantastically together. This is what I mean about being opened minded; I believe in creating diverse teams but to me diverse means a lot more than just gender, it means having people that have different strengths and weaknesses around you so that together you become super-uber human type. Being a female has never been an issue for me. Now I presume there are other industries that are a lot more endemic in their sort of sexism, perhaps media, banking perhaps might be a little worse but technology if you are good enough, you are good enough, but honestly that has been my experience.

Cynthia Dearin:

I don't know if you know her but Dr. Katriona Wallace from Flamingo who works in the AI space, I would love to get her and you together at some point to actually talk more around this topic. For now, we are starting to run short on time, so I wanted to make sure I got a couple of questions around favourite

books or people who have inspired you in the journey, and I was wondering if you could tell me who or what are they and why

- Alicia Navarro: My favourite book that was so powerful I wept like five times while reading it is "The Hard Thing About Hard Things" by Marc Andreessen. He was a guy that started Andreessen Horowitz and started Netscape and a few other things but if you are tech entrepreneur, I don't anyone in the tech industry who hasn't read it, but if you are interested in tech, it is an absolute must-read, it is brilliant and moving and inspiring, and you just sit there going "Yes, this is what I am going through." That is wonderful book, it inspired me, it talks about the yearning the struggle you go through and how lonely it is and I think it was so joyful to read that someone else was going through what I was going through and they conquered and survived.
- Cynthia Dearin: That is pretty cool. How can people get in touch with you if they want to learn more about what you do or if they would like to become a fan?
- Alicia Navarro: I am on LinkedIn, which is a useful tool too, or by the website it is a nice way to get in contact with me.
- Cynthia Dearin: Do you have any final thoughts, particularly for female entrepreneurs who are listening to this conversation and thinking about going out there and taking over the world?
- Alicia Navarro: I think that, this is my advice and take this with a grain of salt, if you focus too much on your gender other people will as well. I am sure you are the same with this Cynthia that the reason we have been successful is because being a woman is just one of the many things that defines us and certainly not the only or first thing. I define myself much more as an entrepreneur, as a passionate person, as a warm person, the fact that I don't have a penis much further down the list of things, and I think you go into business with that as a chip on your shoulder you are setting yourself up for failure. Instead what you need to do is be honest about your strengths and weaknesses and you optimize your strengths and mitigate your weaknesses, do not expect others to mitigate them on your behalf.
- Cynthia Dearin: I think that that is very true, but I am often surprised by how often this gender question comes up. I will give you an example; today I saw a post on LinkedIn where somebody had tagged me and had commented that the words founder and entrepreneur we very infrequently used on female profiles on LinkedIn and they asked me for a view on this and I was confused because my profile says founder but it doesn't say entrepreneur and my reaction was "What is

wrong with those words?" and that person wrote back and said "Nothing, but apparently most women do not feel confident or for whatever reason they don't put them down." I was just shocked because it never has occurred to me one way or the other that there's anything that I can or cannot write on my profile. I just consider it to be a factual description of what I do, why would I shy away from that? So I agree with you, it has never really occurred to me that I could or couldn't do anything because of my gender. Nonetheless we do see in certain industries that it still continues to hold people back, for reasons that are real or because they believe that because of their gender there is something that they cannot do.

Alicia Navarro: That is possible and maybe podcasts like this will go some way to show women that there is not much difference between people that have done it and those that haven't, other than they have just chosen to do it. So it is about helping women understand that they can aspire to this, it is a great life, a hard life, but it is an interesting one and that to achieve it takes hard work, perseverance and passion but it is possible, you just have to do it. I do think a lot of women tend to hold themselves back and I found that when I was living in Australia that that was possibly a bigger problem there, I think there might be more subconscious gender bias in Australia. I certainly felt it when I go back, even as an Australian when I go back I am aware of it because I am foreigner now in a way, so I think maybe spend some time travelling and remind yourself that there are other ways of being.

Cynthia Dearin: Because people can't see this and it is an audio recording, they won't know that I am actually nodding my head. We are pretty much out of time I just want to say a huge thank you for coming on the show. I know people are going to love this interview and I know it is going to be very inspiring to a whole range of women who are either already on the international journey, just getting started or thinking about it and I would love to have you back on the show to see where you are going to next.

Alicia Navarro: I would love to get back. I miss home. Thanks Cynthia