



EPISODE 13

How to nail your product positioning: Insights from Sjoerd Handgraaf, chief marketing officer at Sharetribe

Host: Alan Hart, leader in marketing and customer strategy, Deloitte Consulting LLP

Guests: Sjoerd Handgraaf, chief marketing officer at Sharetribe

Alan Hart: Are you ready to go beyond the basics of marketing? I'm Alan Hart and this is marketing beyond where we talk about the questions that spark change and share ideas that challenge the status quo. Join us as we explore the future of marketing and its endless potential.

Sjoerd Handgraaf (Sjoerd): "Why do people choose us? What words do they use?" So we went through support history. We went through all our reviews online, both good and bad. What other terms that... how do they actually understand our product, and what do we think are the benefits?

Alan: Today on the show, I've got Sjoerd Handgraaf. He's the CMO of Sharetribe. Sharetribe is building a no-code marketplace software for founders. Sjoerd has over a decade of experience in digital marketing and growth for startups with a focus on democratizing technology. He's also a marketplace expert who advises marketplace startups on early-growth strategies. Additionally, he hosts Two-Sided: The Marketplace Podcast, where he interviews

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successful marketplace founders, investors, experts to discuss topics related to starting, building, and scaling online marketplace businesses. On the show today, we talk about the two-sided marketplace, how it's unique, what it means for Sharetribe. We talk about the power of getting your positioning right to get go-to-market clicking, and we talk about his philosophy around give first. That and much more with my guest Sjoerd Handgraaf. Sjoerd, welcome to the show.

Sjoerd Handgraaf (Sjoerd): Thanks for having me.

Alan: We're going to have a lot of fun talking about your company, what you're doing from a marketing standpoint, etc. But there's this thing about your background that I hear you were an aspiring record-label mogul, and I'm not sure I've had one of those on the show before! So let's talk about that.

Sjoerd: Yeah, I think that's a grave exaggeration. I used to be—well, still am—I think you can never really say that you're no longer a punk, but I used to be really into punk music and the punk scene when I lived in the Netherlands where I'm originally from. And, yeah, there is this sort of DIY (do-it-yourself) philosophy there that, you know, anybody can do what they want—bring out a record, you know, or play guitar, even if they can't. I mean, that's sort of the foundation of the music. And so I had a little record label because we wanted to put out my friend's band. And so I don't think I've ever been like “aspiring.” There's not a lot of money in punk rock, but I was a record label boss for a while. I mean, we put out, I think, actually I should have looked this up. We put out one cassette, a CD (for those who still remember), and a DVD.

Alan: Nice, nice. You shipped products—

Sjoerd: Yeah.

Alan: so you technically are a record label. Yeah?

Sjoerd: True, true.

Alan: That's awesome. Well, you did mention you are Dutch, like birth, but you're living in Finland today, right? That's where the company is based.

Sjoerd: Yeah, yeah. Correct.

Alan: I don't know. Cultural differences? Are they similar or very different?

Sjoerd: They are quite a bit different actually. The reason I'm there because I did a student exchange with probably a country that couldn't be more of the same than the Netherlands, which is Denmark. Then on the exchange I met my wife, which is the reason why I'm now moved to Finland. Finnish people are quite like... I mean, you know, from a global perspective, probably quite similar, but there are some things about—they don't do small talk around here. And that's something, especially in the Netherlands, because I think Dutch people have a reputation of being extremely straightforward and just saying it like it is! So that has been... that has some friction or adjustments on my side also. Also within the marriage! But culturally, I still think they're like Northern Western Europeans still. But yeah, it's like, I think in the States, I think the Midwest comes to mind. I think they're like that. There's a lot of like Northern Michigan, like Upper Peninsula, is where a lot of Finnish people go. And I think that's sort of, I think that's where you need to look for the... I was talking to someone earlier who's from Missouri and described himself as like the “Show Me State,” and I mean that is really also what Finnish people are like. This is a great opportunity for a marketer because they're not so great at marketing themselves. They're like, “Oh the product sells itself.” So, a lot of opportunities for me, yeah.

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Alan: That's funny. Yeah, I work with some great Dutch colleagues. And you're very accurate about the directness—which I appreciate, to be honest. Especially if they're on my team, we get right down to business. But it's a little stilted when you first experience it.

Sjoerd: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know it is, and I mean especially, I think there's a lot of problems with British people. Even though they are really close geographically, they're like... just their way of saying things without saying things that the British have sort of elevated to an art, and Dutch people are like, "Why don't you just say it?" Yeah, it's fun. It's fun, those things.

Alan: I love it, I love it. Well, from your, I guess, Dutch background growing up, to school in other countries. What's been your path to where you are today, which you're the CMO at Sharetribe?

Sjoerd: Yeah, that's one, you know, the Dutch, like the punk history, maybe already sort of spoils me, but I wasn't—never thought I was going to be a CMO. I hadn't even really thought about marketing as a profession. I think like growing up, my dad has worked in the same steel factory, which sort of like, I come from this little Bruce Springsteen kind of town where like more than half the population works directly or indirectly in the steel factory. So marketing was not something that people discussed at our house, and I was actually trained to be or educated to be an English teacher. I have a bachelor from the University of Amsterdam in English language and culture and a minor in education. But then when I came to Finland, so after I met my wife at the exchange, I came to Finland, said "OK, let's see what's up." We had a nice time. Why not go there? And I realized that the education system here is much further developed, honestly; it has a very well-regarded worldwide education system and so my degree didn't really give me any opportunity to do that as a profession, but then because of the punk rock thing, like part of that was a lot of things happening on the internet, like forums, that took rock communities as part of this online music community and then combined I think a little bit with this sort of entrepreneurial mindset that I had from the record label and some other small projects, I was able to get a job with a startup here—a local domestic [company] here which made a website builder. It was kind of like what Wix is but in 2008, 2009, and they were looking for a community manager because they just launched sort of their global brand. They were very successful nationally and they're like, "Hey, we can do this internationally." So then I got into this thing called a startup, which was also new to me; like, I had never heard of... what is a startup? No idea. But for those people who work in startups and tech startups, you know that sort of traditional education isn't really that important; it's very much of the merit-based career growth. So as I started there at this company called Moogo at the time—it didn't make it internationally, but nationally still a big success. I started as community manager, then became project manager, then moved slowly more and more towards business development and marketing side—and especially marketing side. And Finland is a rather small country. So, once you get into that startup scene, you sort of roll, automatically roll—especially if you're a foreigner like myself and you don't have the, you know—you have to build quite actively on your network, but then you move. It's a special skill set that you get, I think, from working in a startup. You don't assume that things are taken care of. There is just a little bit DIY thing; you need to take responsibility. And so I moved to another startup where it had a more senior marketing role, like sort of purely marketing focused. Then I had a great opportunity at this company called Yousician. They were music learning app, or they still are a music learning app—probably anybody who's ever played guitar or tried to look up a guitar-playing video tutorial on the net has seen a commercial by them I would imagine—and from there on, I got an opportunity to work at Sharetribe, who were looking for their first marketing hire, and I was really on board with their mission. So it was around the time—I started there 2016—and it was just around the time when Airbnb was getting really big, it was a seedy impact of these marketplace-type companies. So these two-sided companies that don't own their own inventory. And I saw a huge—it was also, I think, the peak of what was called the "sharing economy" at the time, which may be, in retrospective, a bit of a misnomer. Bit more of a benevolent name than the industry actually was. But yeah, I was

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really convinced by that business model, and that's what Sharetribe basically provides maybe. Maybe I can talk a little bit about that, otherwise this story doesn't make so much sense!

Alan: Yeah. Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about what is Sharetribe? How do you guys operate? Who do you serve? That kind of thing; that'd be great.

Sjoerd: Yeah. Sharetribe basically makes software for marketplace founders. So if you have an Airbnb for X, Etsy for X idea, then we have a SaaS solution—software-as-a-service solution—for anybody who has just a little bit of internet savviness, as I would say, nontechnical but like myself, like I said, English lit major, not a coder. Of course, I've gotten to be more technical over the years. But anybody who's not technical, or doesn't want to spend too much time or money up front coding, can launch a fully comprehensive marketplace handling everything from user management, listing management, payment, booking calendar, the whole—any feature you can imagine from that model comes pretty much out of the box. Of course, there are exceptions. But we help. Yeah, we try to help founders, and we help—currently, I think more than 1,200 marketplace projects are powered by Sharetribe. So yeah, so their mission was really like, they sort of targeted like, “Hey, we want to democratize the sharing economy.” And I was very—maybe the punk thing again! I was like, “Hey, that is something I can get behind.” Like that was a very cool thing, and it was, for me, an opportunity to become the lead of the marketing team. So that was a very cool opportunity.

Alan: That's awesome. I mean, you guys serving this, the marketplace creator if you will, pretty unique. I'm curious. In the evolution of the startup, was that always the focus out of the gate?

Sjoerd: No, no, actually it's a really cool story. Part of this comes—I wasn't there at the very beginning. I'm not one of the founders, but, like I said, one of the earlier employees. But the idea actually came—was born—as part of a university research project. So here, there's a very good technical university here; now it's called Aalto University, but it used to be the Helsinki Institute of Technology. And they had a research project to make campus more sustainable and part of that was this sort of lending platform. As a student, if you ever lived on a campus, you know that, who has a drill? You know, I need a drill. We're throwing a party tonight, who has a smoke machine? Like that kind of exchange happening. Or that was what they wanted to facilitate, and it was quite a success. I think it was quite a popular platform. Like I said, early, I think that was maybe 2009, '10, '11, around that time. And then the research project ended and the two founders, Antti [Virolainen] and Juho [Makkonen], they got quite excited by this sort of like being software operator thing. And they were like, “We would like to turn this into a business.” So, they first started with trying to sell that platform to other universities and then other institutions. But I know anybody who's ever worked with organizations like that, the sales cycles are rather long! So it's not like a hockey stick startup growth that you want see, but then moving through that scene and talking to a lot of people, they had met a lot of people with really great ideas about bringing two things together, like sharing economy or marketplace platform ideas, who all ran into this problem of the platform. So then, you know, light bulb moment, “Hey, actually, we have this platform. Why don't we make it available to others and maybe earn some money at the back of it?” So that's how this the idea for Sharetribe was born. So it wasn't always the business focus, but quite soon that became the business focus, and we started with a very, for the time, very cool app, which was sort of like a WordPress-type approach where you just sign in, you call it AlanHart.sharetribe.com. It's immediately live, you could immediately get users, payments running. You just needed to get a PayPal account connected and it worked. It's very basic, but it was extremely fast, extremely reliable, and over time we expanded the feature set a bit. The problem with that was that, first of all, this business or our target audience, like startups, you know, 99 out of 100 don't make it. So there's a lot of natural churn, which for subscription business is not great. And then, on the other side, there were a couple of customers who were really great at sort of proving their hypothesis with our product, has their own MPP (minimum profitable product) going, even got some traction, even having some thousands of transactions, who

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then ran into a need for some feature that we didn't have, like some custom feature. Like each marketplace has a little bit of its own special sauce. That's basically sort of the premise of Sharetribe also—that they share 80% of the same features, but then there's 10% to 20% special sauce that they need to build, that we will never build. So they can build on top. So then we were also losing the good customers. So then we built a new product around 2018, which was more technical where—for those people who work with the marketers, who work with CMSs—around that time, there was this rise of the headless CMS, like content for... yeah. So that was quite promising that like, “Hey, something that sort of is like the back end is a service, but the thing in which you present it, you have to build yourself.” But we don't need to maintain it as a software company. It's quite good. So we built that. It was a success, but then we had the problem that in order to take that product into use, you need to build a client app or whatever, which is really, really a challenge. And we had a really good name in this being easy-to-use software. So we had a bit of a friction that we had these two products. It was hard to choose which one was fitting. So we basically bet the entire farm on the third product, which we released during 2024, which is sort of the best of both worlds. So it's the marketplace back end as a service with a no-code layer on top, which anybody can get in to use. And if you reach the point where you want to build new features that you just take what you already have from the local platform, post it somewhere else and you can build anything on top. I hope this wasn't too sales pitchy, but it is a natural development on how we got there and what we learned from feedback from the founders and see what our customers are doing. And when I say “founders” I mean our customers actually—the marketplace founders.

Alan: No, I think it's super helpful. It's not every day I talk to growth companies like yours that have had the benefit of pivoting the business a few different times. And the learnings that you take and then how you reapply and retrench and go back after the market.

Sjoerd: Yeah, I mean it's nice to say it now. It was a pretty, you know, that last product it took longer than we thought. You can look it up on our blog. The CEO has written quite a nice post about how we were basically flat for two years, juggling these two products, and then building the third one. So it was exciting, but it was also not nice at times. But luckily it paid out; we learned a lot. It's also, on the marketing side, one of the things we learned through that journey.

Alan: Well, you know, you talked a lot about getting the product right. How did you think about getting your positioning right? Like how you talk about what the product can do and, as you think about it, maybe as you've gone through some of these pivots, how does messaging or positioning help to drive go-to-market?

Sjoerd: Yeah, that's a great question because that is definitely one of the lessons that we learned. Because imagine, like the situation where we were in, where we have this highly technical product that you need to be technical to use and you need to be technical to understand the benefit, and then the other one, which is easy to use but has technical limitations. Then also internally suffering from maybe the bias that most tech companies have that you forget that 99% of the world doesn't even know that a software like yours exists—a category like yours is just unknown. So then to have to explain all of that on those couple of seconds that people spend on your website, it's such an incredible challenge, and we were doing it probably much worse than we thought we were. So then when we had this new product, these two stories came together—in our heads at least—like before we launched it, we had a really great sitdown with the entire company, or representative or partner. We're not a massive company. We're 25 people in full time and an army of freelancers and then remote people. But we had people from product, people from customer support, coders, and marketing people. And we really sat down, “OK, what are the things, like why do people choose us? What words do they use?” So we went through support history. We went through all our reviews online, both good and bad. What other terms that... how do they actually understand our product, and what do we think are the benefits? And we sort of lined them up, and we use this great book called *Obviously Awesome* by April Dunford. It's a book about... it's truly a guide to how to position yourself in a medium-sized to small business.

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And yeah, we went through this whole exercise. We adjusted a little bit to our needs, but it's essentially map out what are the competitive alternatives—so not competitors, which I think is a mistake that marketers often make, that you look at direct competitors. But what are the competitive alternatives of doing what you offer customers to do, and from all sorts of (for most) marketing software, the competitive alternative is spreadsheet. That's what people do, or even worse, just not doing anything—doing nothing—is the competitive alternative. If you think about a marketing software, like, increase lead quality or whatever, most people just don't do that. They don't need to. Their solution to the problem is just ignore it. So, when you look at those, then you look at what are your unique benefits compared to those, and then try to wrap those in value. Not features—because a lot of especially tech marketers are quite fond of listing the features—but what is the value that it unlocks? What is the thing that it gives to customers? Then, once you have a couple of convincing values, then imagine who cares about this, who benefits from this? That really gives you a really nice recipe for coming up with your positioning. So, you can tell—make it clear what is the category that you're in, what are your value props, and who cares about them, and try to catch them. So, as an example of what that means is that we now, in the same way that I introduced Sharetribe, also if you go to our marketing site, we are marketplace software for founders. So, we are not marketing software for enterprises, we are not marketplace software for existing marketplace—even though we get better and better at that—but that is not denying enterprise customers or existing marketplaces. But that is not how we position ourselves. This is not how we... we're really in a little bit of a transitioning at the moment towards more, as our product gets more and more mature, we are able to also have more and more mature customers, but when we came out with the product, our positioning was crystal clear that we are for people who are starting businesses, not for people who want to transfer their marketplace business. From all, there's no clear metric on how you measure your positioning, but we could see on all cylinders that it was hitting really well in terms of conversion on the page, in terms of clicking on the ads, in terms of converting in the product, it was very... of course, the fact that it was a great product also helped. No small thanks to the people in the product team, but I think it also just made everybody in the company internally also aligned so that whatever gets told in sales or whenever someone reached out to support with a question that they are already able to narrow down, what type of customer is this? What is the story that we're telling them? Are they the ones that care about the extendibility, scalability, or the price, or the speed? So, this is the first time ever that we were fully aligned as a company internally on who we are serving and what we are doing. It sounds like... it was really great. It's really fantastic actually.

Alan: It sounds phenomenal, just to your point, the galvanizing of the internal alignment. But the other thing I think about when you're talking about the values and who it speaks to, the notion of if the words and phrases that you're using in your communications or in your sales resonate that much heavier with your target. They see themselves in your marketing. They see themselves in your sales messaging. It becomes... no one loves to be sold to, but everyone loves to buy. And I think it gives them the opportunity to see something that's worth buying right from the get-go. So, it's pretty interesting.

Sjoerd: It can also be quite, you know, I've imagined (I don't know if you do this) as your marketing career progresses, you get some insights and then you start feeding back on previous positions that you had or projects, like if I would have known this or if we would have had Instagram. Something like, if we would have had Instagram advertising for one company I worked for, we would have been so much more. I feel that the positioning also I feel like that, but also with some companies I feel like, "Oh, if we would have done positioning, I don't know we would have liked the outcome of how people talk about us, or what is the thing? Why do they buy us?" They just buy us because we're the cheapest and not because of the feature, or something like that. I can imagine it sounds to be pretty brutal to do nicer things like that.

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Alan: It could be for sure, for sure. Well, I think last time we talked, you talked about this notion of or an approach of “Give first, ask later,” and you talked about that in terms of how you approach it with marketing and content. I would love you to just tell us a little bit more about what that is because I was intrigued by the notion of “Give first.”

Sjoerd: Again, it's nice to be here and then have this conversation and make it sound this is all a well-orchestrated plan. I think this is something that has morphed into... I think part of it has been indeed that we always wanted to... we've always been a bit of a value-driven company, which is honestly genuinely like to help founders. Most people from the early team are also very active in the local startup scene. We've got that first of all into it. So, the concept behind it is quite simple. It's that, in our case, customers build the backbone of their business on our software. We're not a complementary software. We're not a CRM for veterinarians or something who already have a business practice. They just need something that helps them grow a little bit better. Most of our customers would probably not have been a marketplace founder if it wouldn't be for our business, for our software, because they just simply, like I said, they can't afford a coder or they wouldn't know where to get started. But that comes with the turn as well because for people to trust their entire business with us, we need to be a reliable partner, and I think that's where this “Give first, ask later” comes in as one part. First, we were very so straightforward in what we have to offer. We like to offer value out of the gate and only make the sale if it's really clear to them. So, there's no features that you need to pay for to try it out. You can try out everything before you need to upgrade, for example. It also comes to the content marketing. So, what we do with our content marketing is that we have this debrief for all of our writing that we have done has always been that it should be completely tech agnostic. Marketplace businesses are actually quite special. They're a very unique business. You're basically building two businesses at the same time. There are all kinds of concepts that do not occur in SaaS businesses or service businesses or consultancy businesses, and there is surprisingly little written about it. So, a lot of founders make the same mistakes over and over again. We have seen that; we've worked with so many. So, what we have done is basically we have just poured a marketplace—well, we have a thing called the Marketplace Academy. We have a bestseller on Amazon called *The Lean Marketplace*, and we just collected all of those lessons in there and we still do that type of thing where we just bring out all the advice that you can use. You don't need to sign up. You don't need to leave your email address even. You can use all of that information, all of the knowledge that we have discovered through our 11-plus years of experience without ever touching a Sharetribe product. When I say “ask later,” actually, maybe we never really ask! Maybe we just hope that you're like, “Oh, I've heard about this. Every time I Google for something relevant to marketplace businesses or every other time I come across this Sharetribe.” Hopefully that will put into your mind, “Oh, maybe they're the one to check out.” Because actually, when I say this, I don't even know do we ask later, honestly. We just put value out in the world, and we hope that that convinces people to at least give us a try. I think a bit to our detriment. This might also be like—I've talked about this with a lot of people, especially from North America or states where they're a little bit more maybe salesy or a little bit more showy approach to sales or to doing things. They're like, “Oh, why don't you test your email here or why don't you do demos?” Or something like that, or “Why don't you hop on?” and “don't do cold calling” and stuff like that. I think it's part culturally because, like I said, actually it's good that we talked about this Finnish thing because Finnish people don't like to talk or convince people of things that are maybe not entirely the case, but I think it's also just because we're a product that really... you need us or you don't. This is not some intent purchase. So, our only job is to convince you that for your need, we are the best and I think that's where this “Give first, ask later” comes from.

Alan: No, I mean, I like the notion. I always think about it as you're educating; you're helping people solve their problems; and yes, hopefully they will buy or you will prompt them to buy and it works out because you've brought them along on the journey. So, it's an interesting piece.

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Sjoerd: I also think it becomes more and more important now. I got an email a couple of weeks ago from a venture capital partner at Andreessen Horowitz. He used to be earlier growth. He's called Andrew Chen. He's great. He used to blog a lot more about a lot of his alts. He was really good. I mean really good growth guru in that way and maybe guru is a real growth expert, like someone with real experience at some really high-skilled companies. He put out an email saying that all marketing channels are dead, meaning that all of the channels that exist right now, they are completely saturated. Everybody has discovered the best practices. Because for a while in marketing, let's say 2008 and onwards, we were in this cycle where every couple of years, something new got added, like Twitter, then Facebook, then there was Foursquare, there was local, there was mobile. It felt like there was a bit of a change in everything. So, there was a lot of times or when this first social graph came out from Facebook, there were really mind-blowing progressions in digital advertising, digital marketing. So, I think for a while, you could get by as a company—and not “get by”—but you could succeed as a company by just being really good at the channel, being a first-mover and just really maxing out. Like this famous story from Airbnb, for example, that they did this cross-posting to Craigslist, for example. Or what was it called? Zynga, remember? Like Farmville? That really just optimized the use of Facebook friend invite. So, there was always some new thing on which you could drive your business. I think his point, I don't know if it is, but perfect, but I think his point was, and I agree with that and I think a lot of marketers also feel this intuitively in their gut, that that is a bit gone and actually in marketing we are moving more back to basics and also in product. Everybody can do the distribution now equally well. So, we're back again at is your product any good, or is your messaging around the product any good, because those are the things that are unique to our business. For example, with the “Give first, ask later,” is your brand good? Actually are you able to live up to that also? Because any company can be nice on the outside. So, I feel that it's a bit of... we've been locked out a little bit, and I think maybe that's something else to think about as a marketer nowadays is what is our competitive advantage here? I'm not sure if there is a clear answer to be honest.

Alan: Well, one other thing I wanted to bring up is that you also have a podcast and it's called Two-Sided: The marketplace podcast. We've been talking about marketplaces, and I think a caveat that that podcast is about lessons learned, etc. What have you learned doing that podcast about marketplace and marketing one?

Sjoerd: I learned a lot. It was part of an exercise just to produce more knowledge for our customers, honestly, because the job of the podcast is to discover what makes marketplace successful. So, I learned a ton. I've learned a ton about top things you shouldn't do as a marketplace. Do I have some time to tell one of those, one of the lessons learnt?

Alan: Yeah, please.

Sjoerd: So, I think the first lesson that I learned and that we also try to instill in our customers, which is a bit weird considering that we're selling platforms, is that marketplace founders often mistake their platform for their product, by which I mean to say is that the products of the marketplace is not the platform, the app, the website where it takes place. The product is actually making the transaction happen between the two sides. So, there's this concept in marketplace that's called liquidity, which is the likelihood that a seller is able to sell what they produce and the buyer is able to find something they want to buy or to rent or whatever is the role. That is the livelihood of your marketplace, that is what you make, that is your product—like liquidity is your product. And it's much less about... I see a lot of founders could also be a bit nervous to go out there, worry a lot about some details: “Oh, maybe we need this integration, maybe we need that.” No, actually you just need to go out there and bring both sides together and see do they care enough to give you some premium on top of this because this is how most marketplaces monetize it. You facilitate the exchange of value and you take a little bit off the top as your business model. Connected to that is the second lesson, which is that, in the beginning, in most cases, you should make your marketplace as small as you can, meaning that don't start a worldwide global marketplace for car rentals or

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something like that because what you need to do... most marketplaces you have some limitations that demand and supply needs to be in the same physical location for them. So, just stick with the car rental, for example. Here in Helsinki, for example, if I would start a car rental marketplace, I should probably focus even on a neighborhood of Helsinki where, OK, when there is a peer-to-peer car-sharing marketplace, are there enough cars in this one neighborhood and do I get enough rental? I shouldn't even care about the entire Helsinki, let alone Finland. It should just be about those two things. That's where your marketplace starts. So, I think those, if there's any two things that I've learned that I talked to a lot of founders, I mention again and again, these are the two things that I check off at the gate: Where are you? What are you doing? Are you doing this or are you not doing this? Because I think this is the number one and number two mistakes that marketplace founders make.

When it comes to podcasting, I don't know how much I learned about it, besides the fact that it's hard to do! It costs a lot of time, and you can't really tell because it is a conversation. But to listen, to hear what's the guest saying, and try not to guide it too much. When it comes to marketing the podcast, I have just benefited from the fact that, over the years, we have had a pretty good mailing/listing community around the brand already. So, I think I was able to glean. I'm not super comfortable giving and taking advice from me on how to grow the podcast because I think I had a bit of starting capital in terms of brand.

Alan: A built-in audience almost.

Sjoerd: Exactly. Exactly.

Alan: That's good. Well, thanks for sharing that. I mean, the marketplace learnings alone are pretty interesting, and marketplaces in themselves are just so unique. So, appreciate you sharing.

Sjoerd: Well, it's cool. What's cool about—and I see it a lot—is that I think once you get into this mode, you start seeing them everywhere, or you start seeing opportunities for them everywhere, because there is this divide between demand and supply and so many levels. I think it doesn't always make sense for economic reasons, but there's still so many to be built I can tell you. For the last season, I talked to eight investors—eight of the world's biggest marketplace investors, or most special—and they're all still fully bought in on the thesis and still investing all the time in this and then seeing good outcomes and investing about it. So, still wide open.

Alan: Love it, love it. Well, one of the things we like to do on the show is get to know you a little bit better. There's a series of questions I want to ask you that we ask everybody that comes on the show. So, my first question is also my favorite: Has there been an experience of your past that defines or makes up who you are today?

Sjoerd: I think I have to go back to the punk stuff again. That just blew my mind, just that people who didn't play played. People who played music started that and just set up shows and everything. This whole DIY thing is extremely powerful and actually has informed a lot of my marketing. All of the marketing experience almost that I do in the company I first tried it on myself. The podcast, for example. I can do this. I'm the first one. I edited myself. I didn't hire an editor. So, I think that is really just—anybody can do it is an attitude that has really shaped me as a person and then also as a professional in that way.

Alan: What advice would give your younger self if you were starting this journey all over again?

Sjoerd: I think maybe the advice I would give myself is to be even more entrepreneurial. I think if my younger self would live now especially, I think the opportunities to be entrepreneurial. Not necessarily saying everybody should be a founder and not everybody can be an entrepreneur and can build a business, but to go out and do even more stuff because I think the opportunity... anybody can be an amateur podcaster, video maker, marketer. The entry level for most of these things that were previously hidden behind the "job"—that you have to be in a job in order to

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do something—I think has just disappeared on almost anything. So, I think advice to my younger self would be do even more, turn a record label into a massive media complex, whatever. I think that's what I would give.

Alan: Awesome. Is there a topic either you're trying to learn more about yourself or you think marketers need to be learning more about?

Sjoerd: People are going to tune out in the episode around this time when I say AI, but it is unfortunately—or not unfortunately, I don't know—I think it's unavoidable. I think we are in the middle of a really interesting period, also within the company, where we're trying to determine—and I think this might be for several other companies as well—how much are people searching through AI? Instead of going to Google, how many people are actually asking ChatGPT for the more complex answers? For example, for a software like ours, which is rather complex, and the audience that we're in, a little bit technical audience, because we have this question in our onboarding wizard, we can see a rapid rise in people who indicated that they first heard about us through AI, and I have no reason to expect that this is going away. So, one thing to learn I think maybe just generally from marketing and AI, I think it's very scary for a lot of marketers. I saw a CEO wrote an email last week about basically telling everybody, “Hey, sorry, my hand's forced. AI is coming for your job.” It was not a very considerate email, but I think that's a feeling that a lot of marketers have, and I think as a reaction, many marketers stay away from it or are “Ah, this can't be good.” I think we can afford to slow roll on this one. I think even just from your career perspective, there's lots of things not to like about it. Let's be clear. I think it's not good at many, many things, but I think it will probably pay off as a marketer, as a career now to be an AI maximalist. Just assume that what the tech bros are saying is going to be the future, that it can do these things, and then just go with that. Just dive in because it's all what's so great about it and this is, you know, something you can imagine I'm excited about is that it's quite democratized. Almost everybody can afford a ChatGPT subscription or one of these AI coder subscriptions, and I think this might be my DIY thing talking about it, but I've been running all kinds of projects about creating little apps for myself. Is it really true that it can do that? Test out every time because they're like, “Oh, it's going to come for content marketing.” Well, is it really? And if so, what is the thing? Because I think through that, you start to learn all that as a marketer, like where is the unique thing that I can add? Where is the unique value? I think that is really hard to do if you do not, what is the word, immerse yourself.

Alan: Go deep.

Sjoerd: Exactly.

Alan: Go deep on it. I agree with you.

Sjoerd: So, I think that would be my advice.

Alan: I agree with you. I think there's a huge amount of learning that we need to do, and maybe to bring it back to your positioning conversation we were having earlier, we've got to position the human piece, but the only way to do that is, to your point, we've got to experiment, we've got to use, we've got to understand how we're different and what the output is, etc. So, we've got to do the hard work.

Sjoerd: I think it's both extremely scary, and I think if we would have—if job security would be a little bit better arranged globally, I think people would maybe be a lot more embracing of this. I think a lot of this has to do with, “But what if there's not going to be anymore coders?” I can see that around me, that it paralyzes people, and I think that in defense of AI, if that thing really can do something where you just don't add value, then we just don't add value. There's no point for us to retreat. It's the same as how automation used to go in factories earlier. Why would a human need to do that? Of course, the downside is that we are still going to have to work 40 hours per week,

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unfortunately. Maybe that's the one thing I would like to change! "Hey, when are we seeing these productivity increases reverted to a little bit more free time?" But generally, careerwise, I think that's the approach to take.

Alan: Well, I've got two last questions for you. One is, is there anything that you're just curious about that's going on in the world? It could be a trend, a subculture, anything like that.

Sjoerd: Quite connected to this AI, I just really like this already for a while. Even pre-AI, when they were maybe two to three years ago, or maybe longer, when there was this rise of no code. There was this rise also that they call these indie hackers—single developers, or single somewhat-technical people, who built these what they call micro SaaS. So, they just build a portfolio of small bets, making very specific services like AI avatar or something or a particular thing about taxes for digital nomads or whatever. It's not always the most profound thing, but I just really like how they do kind of what I described earlier. They take all the opportunities that the web and coding [are] offering nowadays and just living this independent life. They're still working hard, don't get me wrong, but I just really like this creativity to the max and disregarding of boundaries. Are they a marketer or a coder or a product person? Some have a wide range of products that are absolutely unrelated. They just happen to share the same technology and then you figure out, "Oh, this also works for insurance people" or something. So, I really like that, and I think maybe that's where some of the world is going also, as you can be more and more of a business with all these assisted things. So, I think that's really interesting. I like following those people.

Alan: I love it. Last question: What do you feel is the largest opportunity or threat facing marketers today?

Sjoerd: I think I already discussed that honestly. I think all these AI-assisted things. We can really disregard what I said about the free time, etc. But if you just purely think of what can you do in your job, how productive can you be—and then leave out the question whether or not we should strive for that—I think just the opportunities to level up your game with this combination of AI and all this automation. The amount of things that we put out with Sharetribe, we're not even two full-time people in the content team. It includes myself and my colleague who doesn't work full time. I think if you look at what we bring out, you'd think we would have a quiet—if you compare to what you would need five years ago at least, I don't know, five to six people for that. I think that is the power. I think that's the opportunity and a threat, of course, because as that thing progresses, who will—I mean, this is maybe not the nicest thing to end on, but as less people are needed maybe then what does that mean? That could be a threat to marketers. If you're not adapting, where will that leave you? I think that is maybe the thing we can't really, like I said earlier, I think we can't really afford to have to wait for. Does that make sense?

Alan: No, it definitely makes sense. It makes sense. Well, it's been a, I mean, hugely thought-provoking conversation and I've learned a lot, especially around the marketplace businesses, which I don't spend a ton of time thinking about every day. But Sjoerd, thank you so much for coming on the show. Really appreciate it.

Sjoerd: Thanks again for having me. I enjoyed several of your other episodes. So, it's an honor to be here. Thanks a lot, Alan.

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