SUBSCRIPTION ENTREPRENEUR

How To Build A Successful Business On The Side with Kurt Thoennessen

"The other thing that I was thinking along the way of this journey – that maybe caused some hesitation in the beginning – was, 'Can I do this?' Can I be successful in starting my own business? And looking back, I think the answer obviously is yes. And my advice would be if you think you have an idea that could be successful in your business and can do it on the side, believe that."

INTRO:

You're listening to Kurt Thoennessen, my special guest on today's episode of The Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast.

Kurt is an accomplished insurance advisor and the founder of RiskRevu.

They're an online subscription business that helps insurance agents dramatically improve the way they collect information from their clients.

I'm really excited to share our conversation with you today for three specific reasons:

The first is because, Kurt shares the inspiring story of how he took an idea he had to improve his own workflow and turned it into a full-fledged online business.

The second reason is because Kurt shares how he built RiskRevu as a side-project — all while maintaining a busy schedule at his full-time job.

So, if you've ever wondered what it really looks like to take an idea you have and transform it into a product that other people love to use, this episode is for you.

As always, I'm your host Eric Turnnessen and this is Episode 161 of The Subscription Entrepreneur Podcast.

Oh… and the third reason?

Well... if you haven't already guessed, Kurt is my older brother.

And later in our conversation, he may or may not share the true origin of our entrepreneurial spirits.

So, let's get to it!

Eric: Hey, Kurt. Welcome to the show.

Kurt: Hey, what's up, Eric? Thanks a lot. Thanks for having me.

Eric: My pleasure. It's going to be great to talk to you about all these things. The first thing I want to start with though, I hear that you're working on some gingerbread houses.

Kurt: Oh yeah, absolutely. It's an annual tradition in the Thoennessen household. And I guess for the past couple of weeks, I've been working on just making the dough. And the other night, me and the girls, we got working on building the structure. So, everybody has their own design this year. Everybody's making their own house. Everybody's decorating their own house and we're helping each other, but it was a lot of fun.

Eric: Is there also a competition?

Kurt: There could be a competition, but there is no competition at this point. We are just doing it to have fun.

Eric: As far as you know, there is no competition. There's probably some under the table betting going on.

Kurt: Yeah. Well, I think we're going to see a lot of interesting structures, some great ideas. There's different themes happening.

Eric: You guys can have your own Thanksgiving Day parade, like a tour of the gingerbread houses.

Kurt: There'll certainly be enough houses for that. We will have an avenue of gingerbread houses.

Eric: I did not bring this topic up needlessly because we're going to be talking today about you starting your online business, and you've done it kind of as a side project because you still maintain your full-time job. And I think that there may be some corollaries between how you plan and execute the building of a gingerbread house and also do the same thing with building a business. So, I will take ownership of seeing if that metaphor holds true throughout this conversation.

But before we dive into that, can you just give us a little bit about your background? Starting I think with what your job is, and then going into a little bit about RiskRevu and what that's about.

Kurt: Yeah, sure. Absolutely no, I think that'll be a good metaphor. Building a house foundation and all that fun stuff. So, yeah, just a little bit of background. I currently work as an insurance advisor focused on personal insurance in the high net worth space. And I've been there for over

13 years working as a producer in various special projects and servicing as well. So, lots of different hats in that role.

And my background before that has always been in sales. Back to high school, I sold Cutco knives. After high school and after college, I went into outside payroll services for small businesses and then went directly into insurance sales. So, my brain has been wired for a long time to find solutions for customers and put together programs that meet needs. I've loved every minute of that. The aspect of helping people and the aspect of competition that goes along with that.

Eric: So, RiskRevu is kind of born out of that aspect. So, you've been in insurance for 13 years. Over time, you saw a need in something that could be addressed and made more efficient, right?

Kurt: Yeah, absolutely. So, there's two parts to my brain. One is the sales side.

Eric: There's two parts to my brain too.

Kurt: Are there? There's probably more than two parts, but these are the two parts help me with this. But one is the sales side. That's the competitive people person that loves providing solutions and doing that process. And the other one is trying to figure out how to do things better. And in every role I've had in sales, I've looked for ways to make the process better using technology. So, RiskRevu was born certainly out of the experience and the sales process service processes that I did in my work.

Eric: Yeah. Because I mean, if you think about that word process, right? I mean, it's in a word it's not really such a grandiose thing. But if you think about it, that's all sales is, right? It's a process of a starting point and leading somebody or guiding them in the best way possible to the objective that's hopefully mutually beneficial to the person. So, making that as efficient as possible obviously will increase your results. Right?

Kurt: Absolutely. What I've learned over the years is that there are certain aspects of the sales process that either I'm not very good at, or I don't particularly enjoy, and potentially the customer doesn't particularly enjoy. So, RiskRevu, we'll talk about this, but that was an identification of a bottleneck or a problem that I found and attempted a solution. So, that's exactly what it was.

Eric: So, what are the things that you think you are good at in terms of sales?

Kurt: In terms of sales, making connections, introductions relationship building, identifying where a solution can fit and then designing a solution for a specific problem. An example in insurance is you have someone with an insurance portfolio with four or five homes spread around the country, domestic employees in various states, cars in various States, so on and so forth. So, that creates a lot of complexity and the need for a specific design. So, I'm really good

at putting that program together. And then as I said, the relationship building and the people piece of it, which is just enjoyable to me as well.

Eric: What are you good at?

Kurt: Well, some of the paperwork stuff, the backend processing. In insurance and other sales positions, there's always paperwork. There's always processing. There's always the mundane aspects of that work. So, those things I don't particularly enjoy. Going back to the desk and sitting down for hours, and just plugging in numbers from one place to another or data from one place to another. That's not my specialty. I like to be out in front and talking to people. I'm kind of outgoing and personality. So, I enjoy that being outside and being with people versus plugging away at a keyboard.

Eric: That I think gives us a very good idea in foreshadowing of what the solution that's going to be addressed. I think you're mis-characterizing it by saying you're not good at it. I mean, obviously push come to shove, you had to do it, you could obviously do it. It's basically more like I don't want to do that. And I think that that's for entrepreneurs, this is an important area to be able to have awareness around in terms of our own skillsets. What is it that we have to do? What is it where they're good at? What should we outsource? And what is it that we just don't have to do? It's important, especially when you're a one-person team or a two-person team, to be able to leverage as much of the resources that you can from other people and other tools.

So, in your situation, and also, the other person or the other tool can be technology, as you did in your case. So, RiskRevu you, this is a online software technology that you created. So, can you give us just an overview of what it is and who you serve with this product?

Kurt: I think you're right. It's not that I'm not good at those things and can't be great at those things that I don't enjoy, but they're part of the process. So, like you said, an entrepreneur and that mindset is about making improvements to existing processes. So, that's really what this came to.

And RiskRevu, what it is it's a digital product. And basically, the company, we build smart forms, digital forms that contain conditional logic specifically for insurance agents to use with clients and others, parties that are involved in sales and service tasks. And we build those smart forms. The platform allows agencies and their agents to use them with clients, such that the data gathering aspects of certain sales processes, certain service tasks can be done through a smart form. Versus picking up the phone, calling somebody, asking a million questions, and then hanging up the phone, or typing out an email with all those questions in it. Or filling out an old PDF form.

Eric: Right. And I think that this solution in relationship with your customer gets you as quickly to be able to play to your strength, which is the relationship building aspect, right? Because in order for you to do your job, obviously you need the data. You need to understand there are

situations not only you, but other insurance agents and people. So, this tool is basically providing a process for them to go through where they can go to one place, enter in all their stuff, submit it. And now, the first place you get involved in a relationship sense is where you can be already talking about the solution and not just gathering information.

Kurt: Exactly. I do recognize that every conversation with somebody, whether in person or over the phone is an opportunity to build that relationship. But what I recognize is that when you're just peppering someone with questions that could be done through a smart form, if they're more comfortable with that, it's better to build a relationship in my opinion when you have all that data already and you didn't spend an hour peppering them with questions. You can go to that meeting exactly what you said with the information in hand, potentially with a solution in hand too, to then discuss the solution, share your thoughts that are more strategic in nature versus more tactical.

Eric: It presents a more professional persona too, right? Because if you have to play all the roles in your business, it's like I've definitely seen this in an SNL sketch or something like that. Where somebody walks into the room and they're the intern, and they're wearing a certain set of clothing. And they interview the person about something and then they leave the room, take their coat off or something, and enter back into the room and pretend they're a totally different person. There is a certain professionalism it portrays when you separate the out either with another person on the team. Or in this case, technology that takes care of it. And therefore, the perception of the client, which in your business and really a lot of businesses, the perception of the client when they're dealing with you is that they only deal with you on certain things. I definitely experienced this with MemberMouse in the beginning when I had to play, do support role, as well as all the other things. It's a much more tricky thing to guide the relationship with the customer in terms of how they should deal with you personally, when you're playing all the different roles. I'm not sure how to put it, but there's something about if they're dealing with you on all the support stuff, it kind of takes away from the perceived value of the relationship when you're dealing with them on the strategic things.

Kurt: I think that's a really interesting observation, and I agree with it. I think that separating out the data gathering, which is a task that a smart form can do, and leaving that to a separate device, a separate technology, it definitely improves and increases the professionalism of the person using the form. I think that you hit the nail on the head.

Eric: Let's take a step back a little bit. Because RiskRevu is basically a software solution. It's a software as a service product. You don't have any background in technology. And I think that this is a common scenario, right? Where people are working in a job or something for a long period of time, they recognize some improvements that can be made, and they want to do something about it, but they don't know how to do it. They don't have the skill set, etc. So, how did you bridge this gap? Where did you start when you had the idea and you wanted to bring it into reality and manifest it?

Kurt: It's a great question. And it kind of goes to the origination story of the whole thing. This journey started for me probably about five years ago when I went through an educational program, an executive ed program with The Wharton School. And that was a yearlong project or a yearlong opportunity that I went through. And as part of that, there was a separate project that we worked on throughout the whole year. And the directive was to just think about a project you want to do and do it by the end of the year. And it was a great opportunity for me to just take a step outside of my normal day to day grind and think, how can we make this better? How can I make this better? And through that process, I kind of identified the biggest bottleneck for me, which ended up being data gathering.

And so, I said, "Data gathering is a bottleneck for me. And it potentially could be a painful process for the client." And I looked at the world around me and I said, "There's so many insurance companies out there just collecting data online. And that's all they do. And they're very successful doing it with all manners of clients." I said, "Well, if they're doing it successfully, well, I should be able to do it successfully too." So, I said, "Is there a solution like this out there already for me in my role?" And I looked around and did some Googling, and I found nothing. So, I said okay, this is going to be the project.

I said, "Okay, the best way to do this," ultimately the solution came was smart forms or digital forms that contain conditional logic. And I started building my own forms and them out just through solutions like Typeform.

Eric: Right. Perfect concept.

Kurt: Yeah. And they ended up working really well. And my first version or first rendition ended up being a website that was designed around a digital sales process that started with forms online. And that was kind of version 1.0 of this proof of concept. And that worked really well. So, I said, "Let's keep going with this. Let's keep building more forms and see how clients like them."

Eric: So, when you say see how clients like them, did you have a test group you were working with at that time?

Kurt: I did. Well, my test group was my client base.

Eric: Okay. So, your existing clients.

Kurt: My client base, my existing prospects, people who wanted to buy insurance for me. So, it was somewhat of a leap of faith going from the tried and true old methods of okay, you want to buy home insurance? Let's set a time. Let's get on the phone. And let me gather all this information from me over the phone to, "Okay great, you want to buy a home insurance for me? Here's my process. It starts with a smart form online. You fill it out, submit it. And then I do my analysis, send you a proposal, and then we schedule a time to meet." So, it was a whole transformation of the sales process. So, there was a test group. There was nerves along the

way, wondering if it would work and if it would be accepted. And ultimately it was. So, I said, "This is great. And everybody else in my industry should be able to benefit from the solution." And that's where RiskRevu kind of was born and just said, "Okay, let's build a company where we can provide these smart forms to everybody who needs them."

Eric: Okay. So, I'm going to take a certain perspective on anything you just said, because it's important to note that you were successful, right? You have a site that launched, you have a software product. So, the process you go through, I mean whenever we go through a process to create something, and especially if it's something new to us, there's always parts of the maze we walk down that we have to hit dead ends and we walk back from. But if you ultimately make it through the maze, clearly you took a right path. And some of the things that you touched on here, I think I'm going to abstract them a bit because it's important. These are definitely important things for success of any project. And the place that you started was you identified a specific problem to solve data gathering, right? The mistake that people can make, and it'll really kill the project before even starts is if you have too many things you're trying to solve. It's just not even possible or feasible from the beginning, just based on how you're looking at what you want to address. So, having something very specific is an important success criteria.

The second part is you searched to see if it was already being done. Basically, identifying okay, can I just get an off the shelf thing and actually solve this problem for myself, which is ultimately what you were trying to do. You're trying to improve your business, increase your sales as an insurance advisor.

You're trying to improve your book of business, right? So, that's your ultimate goal. And if there's tools out there that already exist to do that, then great. I'll use that. You didn't find that.

You did a proof of concept. Now, the important aspects of the proof of concept that you naturally followed here is that you want it to be something that within your own technical capabilities, that you could implement quickly and iterate quickly. Because the point of the proof of concept is to put it in front of people, have them interact with it, and then go through this process of iteration and refinement. Seeing how they respond to it, based on that response, make adjustments, put it back in front of them, see how they respond, make adjustments.

So, if you spend too much time investing in the proof of concept, you're going to get attached to it. You're naturally going to resist the iterative and refinement process that's essential to get the valuable feedback from the users that you need. So, you did that right.

So, now, you went through this process of improving the proof of concept to the point where you're like, "This is working for me. This is working for my clients." Now this product has come from a place of identifying the problem to creating a solution that I now feel I can put in front of others like me, who are in my situation, and they can pay me for this. So, when you get to that point, it's about, "Okay, I have a set of requirements as defined by this proof of concept." Talk about where you went from there.

Kurt: No, it's great point. We called it minimum viable product. And there was a point where I was getting overly excited about different features and functionality that I wanted to have, but we ultimately decided we want to get the product out there and make sure people will use it. So, from there, once we built it ... and you mentioned I don't have the technical background, and I would just go back to that real quick. And that's correct. However, I've always been interested and been utilizing technology. I remember working at Accenture where we designed these massive spreadsheets with crazy formulas in them to do data analysis. And I designed another spreadsheet when I was at Paychex, and then continually working with those if then statements to deliver things. And really ultimately, that's what the conditional logic is. It's all of these if then statements that help us get to the information that we want. So, from the point after we built the product and we launched it, then it was about getting the word out, making people aware.

Eric: Well hold on a second. I want to take a step back though. Because you're skipping over a big piece here. You had a proof of concept or a minimum viable product. Well, really proof of concept, right? Because the MVP was after the proof of concept. As I know, I know this because I'm your brother and I saw this process, right. But the proof of concept was Typeform, but then you needed to build the actual software as a service, which ultimately was WordPress, MemberMouse, and then custom solution. So, I'm asking specifically, what was the process of going from the proof of concept to actually implementing this other solution?

Kurt: That was a process of just design. On my part, my part was the design. My part was what is the user experience going to be? And so there, it was just Wireframes, Balsamiq, working with different tools to design the user experience. And put together I don't even know what you call it but a software architecture plan that I could share with our developers.

Eric: Requirements document.

Kurt: Yeah. So, I put together all of the requirements, all of the things that I wanted the site to look like and feel like, and how I wanted it to operate. And then I hired developers to work with us, to bring it to life. That kind of started a very exciting and new stage for the business. And that was really the starting point for going into business was just okay, I put some time into the design, and then made a decision to build it.

Eric: Right. And `at this point, it's kind of like intuitively we know this, but I'll just state it explicitly. The proof of concept phase was important because at the time we're getting into now where you're hiring developers and all this, it takes a capital expenditure. You have to understand okay, what's my budget for this project? Which means that you understand that there's a certain success rate that you're expecting. A loose business plan. Okay. This is how much I can expect to make or whatever. In other words, you want to be able to verify that it's a worthwhile risk to take. That I'm going to take $20,000 or whatever, hire these developers, have them build this piece of software, and feel that it's a safe, relatively safe bet to make.

Kurt: Yeah, absolutely. I remember there was just a lot of excitement on my end, because I knew the value it could bring. I knew the amount of time it was already saving me. Like you said, I work a full-time job as a producer. So, over a couple of years, I had been beta testing this. I had seen the amount of time that it was saving me. And partially, that allowed me to do this side gig is because of the time I was saving with the forums. So, I knew right off the bat that this was going to be an incredibly valuable tool for the industry. So, I was very confident in the success, the potential success of it. And then it was just about building it and then executing the marketing plan.

Eric: Okay. So, that's another whole big thing. So, you built it, you got V1 out there. It's actually live on RiskRevu.com. And yeah. Now it's like okay, my doors are open. How do I get people here? It's really like you build a ship and now it's sitting in the harbor. And it's like how do I get from Spain to America? I mean, it's really, I think a more challenging question than how do I build the ship in the first place?

Especially these days when people can get a quote unquote site online or something, there's all sorts of tools available. There's WordPress, Squarespace. There's so many ways that you can build something to get online. So, you have so much more influx of people doing it. But the question for everybody will always have to come to a point where okay, I have something out there. How do people hear about it?

Kurt: Right. That's potentially the most important part of it too. Because you throw up a business online, no one goes to it, then you're not making any money. Our marketing strategy and plan initially started just with a few friends in the business that I knew, and we gave them free access to the tool. We wanted them to start using it and just give us their honest feedback. And we did that for a few months and we got some really great feedback. That data's pivot in certain areas and stay true to our original plan and others. So, we did that for a while. And then from there, we started to do some light marketing. This being a side gig, it was tough to find time to do the marketing. So, I wrote a blog here and there. I posted on LinkedIn. And initially, my thought was with a SaaS business, it's like you build it, everybody's going to come.

Eric: Right. Field of dreams.

Kurt: They didn't come. It takes a lot to get people to come and to try something new out like that. So, I started doing more individual outreach to people I know, and asking if they wanted to try it out. So, we got some hits early on. But it was slow going for a while just because we didn't really have a marketing engine behind it. But over time, we continued to do blogs. We continued to build relationships and share the story one-to-one. And we joined an association where the association started to promote us to their members. And today, I would say 50% of our users are now from that association. So, there's a lot of relationship building that was done. And lately, we've done a conference where that has generated a lot of activity.

So, if I look back and I say, "What's a lesson learned here?" Having a marketing strategy right from the beginning would be very helpful. Having support in that area would be very helpful too.

Eric: Yes. And though, without having the previous experience of having gone through it before, how are you going to create a plan?

Kurt: True.

Eric: If you were you three years ago or wherever when you were going through this process and you heard you say, "Okay, learn from me, have a marketing plan from day one." What would you three years ago have done? Would you be able to do anything differently than what you actually just described? Because really, coming to that point is the voice of experience.

Kurt: Right. It's also a timing thing. The one thing that we have that's a limited resource is time. So, with a full-time job and a family, and wanting to get this business off the ground, you have to prioritize and manage your time. So, you do what you can. And that's what we did. And we did see certain times where we had spikes in sales. And then we had certain times where there was a lull. And then we continued to take action and do activity that's going to continue to grow the business over time. But really, I think our strategy for growth from day one, and continues to still be a big part of it is relationship building. And focused on one-to-one outreach versus mass marketing at this point.

Eric: Have you guys done any paid advertising?

Kurt: No, not at this point. I think we might've tried a Facebook ad once, but that's it. I mean other than joining a conference, paying to be an exhibitor at a conference, we've done that a couple of times. Now it's been all organic.

Eric: Well to your point about realizing that this is all about relationship building. I mean, regardless of what business you're in, ultimately when it comes down to it, that's what it's about. Relationship building. Now, some businesses versus others can do that in a more automated way. Just based on the nature of the market itself, your marketing plan is going to be unique to your business. It's just like when we were talking about your proof of concept phase and user experience testing of that proof of concept, it's an iterative phase that's part of the process, and refinement is part of the process. It's the same thing with a marketing plan.

Especially, and psychologically, there's a lot of factors at play here too. Because like you referenced, I had the same feeling when I built MemberMouse. I was like okay, I built it. I'm done. I ran this long race. You're kind of fatigued and tired, and you want to sit down and rest and just let everybody come, walk up to you, and pay you money. But at that point in time really, it's like okay, you can take a little bit of rest, but then you just got to get back up and start another race. And that's an important thing to realize for people who want to start

businesses, because a lot of us who have started businesses had that mentality. All I have to do is build it and then success. That's not the way it works.

Kurt: Exactly. It takes an effort. And I remember you telling me maybe right before we were going to launch, starting a business is like having a baby. And I've had three of those. It's the beginning of a journey, not the end. So, starting a business is like having a baby. It's like okay well once you launch it, that's when you start having to take care of it. And that's when you have to start really working to get it out there. And it is an effort to do that. And our strategy has been as I said, relationship building, don't go too crazy with it as far as the marketing. But one agency at a time, teach them how to use it, show them, make them comfortable with it, and then move on to the next agency.

Because that's another thing that is important with this software is that we are trying to change the way people do their jobs. And for a lot of people, that is not easy. And I think it's a better way. I will never go back fully to doing it the old way. But other people don't think that yet. So, that is an education process that I enjoy. And I enjoy showing the different forms, and different use cases, and sharing what clients have said about it. What other parties, like we work with car dealerships, what car dealerships have said about the experience of working with RiskRevu forms. So, there is that education process and that onboarding. That's really important as well.

Eric: And again, relationship building. Because ultimately if somebody is entrenched in a way of doing things, even if it's to their best interest, they need to be going to somebody that they can trust in order to break those habits, in order to even attempt to try something new.

Kurt: Yeah, absolutely. And it's an understanding of the market too that you're selling to. We sell to insurance agencies all across the country. And I've been in an insurance agency for 13 years. I've been involved in vendor selection and purchase processes over the years. So, I know that it's a difficult process. I know it's a long process. I know that there are a lot of questions, and that's something that we have to build into our process as well. So, it's taking your customer's mindset and readiness into account. Readiness for new technologies.

Eric: So, now that things are where they are, where you're working your job still, and you also have a live growing business, how are you balancing these two things?

Kurt: Time management is number one, right? So, the one blessing that I'll just mention upfront is that RiskRevu really meshes well with my job. Because every day in my job as an insurance producer, I come across situations where I'm gathering data, or someone else is gathering data. So, my job gives me the ideas to create RiskRevu forms. So, there is that synergy between the two. Obviously as I said before, utilizing RiskRevu as often as possible saves hours and hours per week. Where it used to take me maybe an hour to work with a new prospect, it now takes five minutes. So, that hour is saved, and multiply that times five, times 10, whatever the case is per week. And multiply that times the type of form that I'm using.

So, it saved a tremendous amount of time. But the reality is I'm doing work at night on the couch, I'm doing work on the weekends. I like to wake up early on Saturdays and build smart forms. There's a lot of stuff that goes along with it. So, it is a balance, but it does take time management and really focusing on when things are going to get done, having a goal to get them done, and then getting them done.

Eric: Right. I think an unspoken ingredient here, but it's very apparent, is you have to be passionate about it, which you clearly are. It's not just a job, like the way that we commonly think about jobs which is like it's just something I have to do. You really have a passion for helping yourself in terms of improving your processes but then also sharing that with people who are in the same position as you and helping them. So, it's a creative process, just like how somebody might paint as a hobby, or write music or something. You're expressing your creative abilities in this endeavor.

Which is critical because if people want to try and do something like this, and they're simply doing it because they want that golden ring, that mystical golden ring at the end of whatever illusionary road that they think is going to unfold, you don't necessarily have the energy to get through all this stuff you have to go through in order for some day, maybe when the fruits of the labor come.

Kurt: Absolutely. It is a creative process. One of the things I most enjoy about the business is building smart forms. And taking a PDF that has just 100 questions in it and converting that into a smart form using conditional logics. There's if then statements, and yes no questions, and all these different question maps, if you will. So, it's a fun process and it is a very creative process. And you're right. There is an aspect of it that's like a hobby for me.

Eric: Now you also have a business partner, Andrea who's involved. Can you share a little bit about how you two work together?

Kurt: Yeah, no. Andrea is my business partner and has been with me from the beginning on this. And it's great because she thinks differently than me. I am sometimes like a bull in a China shop where I get an idea and I just want to do it and get it out there. And she's much more observant and detail oriented. So, I'll share my ideas with her before we throw it out there, and then she'll give me some awesome feedback to make it even better. So, we are constantly bouncing ideas off each other. And whether it's product design, marketing, operations service. And this is just something that I'd say to anybody that's looking to really get into entrepreneurship, and a business is just to have someone that you can do it with. Building anything on your own is incredibly difficult. And having someone there with you who can complement you is extremely valuable.

Eric: The complementary aspect is important there. I don't know if it was last podcast episode or two podcasts episodes ago, we talked to Mike Cliffe-Jones. And he basically said the same thing. I mean his wife and him work together. And it's been a really integral part of their

success. And part of that is that they have different perspectives that they approach problems with.

So, imagine two people starting a business, and both of them don't have the motivation to do it and nothing's going to happen. You describe it as bull in a China shop. But really if we break that down a little bit, there's an enthusiasm, there's a fire, there's an excitement. And that is essential, that kind of go get it, not so much thinking about it. Just do it and execute, take action. Right? That's essential. And that type of energy in the beginning is actually somewhat more beneficial I would say, because you have to get the ball rolling somehow. If you have two people or too analytical in the beginning, then nothing will ever happen. No action gets taken. They just talk about it a lot.

But in the later stages, in the more mature stages, it is valuable. You don't want to just always take action all the time without thinking about it. Because you have an established thing that you need to consider, and there's stuff like that. So, it's important to have somebody else there with that perspective. "Okay. This is a great idea. Let's consider it. Let's put it in this context and see if it matches." But I certainly agree with you. It's good to have people on your team who view things differently. And for there to be an agreed upon thing where it's valuable to have a team, it's not just one person dictating everybody. It's like no, we're a team. And we're going to take everybody's perspective and move forward based on the agreement.

Kurt: Exactly. And it's just been a lot of fun working with her on the project, and to see it grow to where it's been and going to grow even further. So, that's been a critical aspect of our success.

Eric: So, given what you've been through so far, what advice would you have for people who may also be in a similar position of I'm doing a full-time thing or whatever, and I've got an idea, and I want to do this thing on the side? From your experience you've had about actually successfully executing on the desire to build something, what advice would you have for these people so that they could also get there?

Kurt: Great question. And I think we touched on some of these lessons learned early in the conversation. Find someone who you can do it with that compliments you. As soon as you launch, figure out how you're going to market it, that type of stuff. But the other thing that I was thinking along the way of this journey that maybe caused some hesitation in the beginning was can I do this? Can I be successful in starting my own business? And looking back, I think the answer obviously is yes. And my advice would be if you think you have an idea that could be successful in your business and can do it on the side, believe that. Because the advice is believe that you can do anything you want to do as long as you take the action to do it, which it's as simple as if you want to practice the violin, take violin lessons, if you want to learn how to play that.

So, same thing. If you have an idea and you want to bring that to life, just start doing it. And like I did, I started building smart forms just for myself and I used them. And then I started building

more smart forms and more, and then I developed it into that idea. So, I think it's just if you have an idea, believe in it, and it can definitely come to fruition if you take the necessary steps to do that.

Eric: I would certainly echo that. I mean, that's how MemberMouse started too. I didn't intend to start a software company. I needed something myself for an online product that I was selling. I needed a membership component. So, I built it. And ultimately, that through a series of things turned into MemberMouse. And our brother Carl, who also I've done a podcast episode with, you can search for Rogue Territory if you want to listen to his story, he has a denim brand that's very successful. And it was the same thing. He was excited and wanted to learn how to make jeans. He had an any fashion background. He just started making jeans and started making custom jeans for people. And then that turned into a ready-made brand, etc., etc.

There's a quote from The Alchemist that comes to mind at this time, The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho. It says when we make a decision, it's like a choice that we make to jump into a stream of water. And we made that decision, but we have no way of knowing where that stream will carry us. So, to your earlier point, if you have an idea, and I would also say you have the excitement about something, do it. Because the resistance to doing it is the fear of failure. But the fear of failure is just something we create to keep us from enjoying the things that we're excited about. The fact of the matter is the enjoyment is the true gift. You haven't reached any goal in your business. I haven't reached any goal in my business. We're still working every day on making it better, and that's not going to end. But the process is enjoyable, and that's ultimately what makes it exciting for us to continue to do it. If that excitement is lost in the business, then people aren't going to be interested in your product. So, it's important to follow what you're excited about, believe in yourself, and go with it.

There will be trying times on the journey, right? Talk about that. It wasn't a straightforward path, right? You started it, but were there times when you felt discouraged or you thought that you may not continue doing it? And how'd you get through that?

Kurt: There were times where we were super excited because we'd be sitting at a soccer game on Saturday. And we'd get an email notification that we got a new agency that signed up who was new to us. And so super exciting. And that would keep us going for another week or so. And then we'd have a lull for a month or two where there'd be no pings, no interest, no signups. So, that gets discouraging.

I think ultimately, my long-term vision or view of the future for this product kept me going where it's just like okay, we're in the first year or first year and a half. And we're still growing. We're still a new business and we're still growing. So, there was always this underlying belief that business was going to succeed. And that was founded in my original excitement back to the pre-launch days. It was also founded in feedback from users. And also, one of the features I most enjoy about MemberMouse is the logs. I look at the logs not every day, but frequently. Just to see hundreds of people using the product on a daily basis that keeps me going too.

Whether or not there's a sign up in a month, or a week, or whatever, the fact that people are using something that we built every day and finding value in it keeps me going.

Eric: Yeah, I have that same feeling. And I don't imagine that we're the only ones, people who start businesses. Speaking of MemberMouse and how you've used it, are there any other interesting use cases you can think of or tricks that you used in this project?

Kurt: Not necessarily. But I think the interesting thing about our usage of MemberMouse is that we're not selling a digital product that someone can consume, like a book or an educational course. We're selling smart forms that then can be used by the agency and their personnel. We have kind of an interesting use case with that. And we're very grateful for the ability to do that. Because one of the problems that we were trying to solve with this whole endeavor was typically, an agency has one set of smart forms on their site. When that form is submitted, it goes to one person. And then that one person has to distribute it to whoever it's supposed to go to. So, what we wanted, we wanted everybody in the agency to have their own set of forms so that when they send a link out and a form to get completed, all that information comes right back to them. So, we were able to do that through our implementation, through our developers. I think that's just a little bit different than probably some other uses.

Eric: The things that actually I get excited about too with MemberMouse is that the way that it ends up being used, that there was no original intention for being that way. And I think that speaks to some of the flexibility in terms of the programmatic flexibility of using MemberMouse, which comes from my CTOs' and my background as software engineers. We designed it in such a way that we knew that we weren't going to account for all the cases and how people want to use it. So, we provided ways that people could hook in and developers could hook into it in different ways. And in this situation, that led to the ability to be able to do what you're doing, which is great.

I think I have one final question. I touched on earlier that you, Karl, our other brother, and I, and really Cindy our sister. We've all gotten involved in entrepreneurial things at different times. And wondering if you had a theory about why it is that we've kind of all ended up being entrepreneurial.

Kurt: Well, I think our parents had a big influence in that. Our mother always had businesses that she was involved in when we were kids. And dad was always tinkering with ideas and looking at ways to make things better. But even going way back when we were kids, we looked for different business ideas. Renting out a Nintendo on the weekends to friends. I remember doing that. So, I don't know what my theory is. It's just we've had a lot of good energy in our family around being in a business or starting a business, coming up with new ideas. That just kind of breeds more ideas. I don't know.

Eric: I had forgotten about that renting of the Nintendo. Was that the Super Nintendo?

Kurt: I think it was the N64. It was $15 for the weekend. And I think the games, I don't think we charged extra for the games. It was just 15 bucks for the whole thing. 15 bucks for the weekend, and we rented it out to our friends.

Eric: I wonder, was that a covert operation? Because I don't think I received any royalties from that operation.

Kurt: They might still be in the bank account waiting for you. You should go check.

Eric: Send me that information.

Kurt: I'll have to dig it out. But yeah, you definitely got your cut.

Eric: Okay. I'll believe you. Thanks so much for coming on the show and sharing all this with us. Just to wrap up here, tell us where people can find out more about you and your business.

Kurt: So, anybody can look me up on LinkedIn, Kurt Thoennessen on LinkedIn. And then RiskRevu site is R-I-S-K-R-E-V-U .com. Check that out. And then if you Google my name, you might find my blog about insurance if you're interested in that. But that's about it.

Eric: Have you ever thought about creating a jingle for RiskRevu, like a radio ad type jingle?

Kurt: You know what, we have. We have some very musical daughters, and they've come up with some jingles. Mia, I won't sing it for you now, but maybe you'll hear it in the future. But yeah, we've definitely thought of some jingles. If you have any ideas, we'll definitely be open to those.

Eric: RiskRevu. R-I-S-K-R-E-V-U. There's potential there. It could work.

Kurt: It definitely could. I think you're onto something.

Eric: All right, thanks again for coming on the show. And we'll talk to you soon.

Kurt: Thanks a lot, Eric. This is great.

OUTRO:

Thank you so much for listening to my entire conversation with Kurt.

I hope you are walking away with some ideas and inspiration that can help you turn your own idea for an online business into a reality.

I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to Kurt for coming on the show and being honest about his journey so far as an entrepreneur.

To get links to all the resources we mentioned in this episode, head on over to SubscriptionEntrepreneur.com/161.

There you'll also find the complete show notes and a downloadable transcript of our entire conversation.

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Thanks for being here and we'll see you next time.