

Alison:

This is the Breakthrough Podcast, an ongoing series where we interview game changing leaders in technology, business, government, and entertainment about their experiences and perspectives in life and leadership, learn about their latest breakthroughs, and hopefully inspire you to have some of your own.

Welcome to The Breakthrough. I'm Alison Dean, and today we are talking with Kieve Huffman, currently CEO and founder of Engager Brands, which builds, owns, and operates a portfolio of authentic cannabis brands. Keith sent me this quote from Abraham Lincoln. "The most reliable way to predict the future is to create it." I like that quote. Hi, Kieve.

Kieve Huffman:

Hi Alison.

Alison Dean:

All right. So I want to know, what does that quote mean to you? Why did you choose it?

Kieve Huffman:

I chose it because it just resonates so much with me throughout my career in that I have always been on I guess what would be considered the cutting edge of the what's next. And many of the jobs I've had, whether it was creating the digital business models for music way back in the day, or creating the way that cannabis brands are created and marketed today, there isn't a rule book. There's no history to go back to. And you could easily just throw up your hands in the air and say, oh, well, I don't know how to do this. No one does. But I kind of get excited about figuring out and being the pioneer and making up the rules and sort of creating the future. So that's why I selected that. And also, just as it comes to historical figures for me, Abraham Lincoln, he's one of my all-time faves. He's like one of those guys. You say, "Hey, if you could go back in time and hang out with one of your idols, who would it be?" And he's one of mine.

Alison Dean:

Well, you just stole a question from me, so we appreciate that context. Okay, so in this new season of The Breakthrough, we're kind of mixing up our questions set a little bit. So I want to know what comes to mind when I say what is the first breakthrough that you remember that set you on your career path?

Kieve Huffman:

So it's interesting for me, breakthrough meaning like an epiphany or a breakthrough at work?

Alison Dean:

You interpret however you feel it serves the story.

Kieve Huffman:

Okay. Well, I'll tell the story about early in my career, I was working in the music industry. I was working for a company called Columbia House. It was like direct marketing mail order back in the day. And I was managing bands and I was doing music supervision for films and a whole bunch of

things that started happening. The band that I had been managing, which was like the hottest band in New York, couldn't get a record deal for whatever reason. This movie that I had done the soundtrack for couldn't get a distribution deal. And I was having one of those moments where I was like, okay, where am I in life? What do I want to do next? So as I have been prone to do in my life, typically what I'll do is I'll take a trip somewhere and I will go as far away as I can from civilization and just kind of reflect.

So this time around, I met up with a buddy of mine in San Francisco. We drove north. Ended up going to this area called The Lost Coast, and it's about five hours north of San Francisco. We had a drive through, it was a rainstorm at night, we're driving through these single roads. We can't see anything. We pull up to this campsite. There's no one there. There's no way to camp out because it's pouring rains. We sleep in the car, wake up the next morning and go out and come across this herd of elk that's between us and the bay.

Alison Dean:

Okay.

Kieve Huffman:

So first I have to figure out how to maneuver around a herd of elk. That's a whole nother story to tell sometime. Yep. We figured it out. We got through to the beach, he took a left. I took a right and said, look, as long as it takes, come back when you're done.

And so I had time to just reflect on my life. And for me, I find that's really, really important or easier to kind of reflect when I'm just away and I'm not in my office or I'm not at my house. And for me at the time, I just started to think, well, what do I really think is going to happen next? And this is dating myself a little bit. This was the mid nineties I think. And I said, you know what? I think this internet thing is really going to take off.

Thinking back this was way pre broadband. And so I had that moment where it's like, you know what? Didn't work out with the band. It didn't work out with the movie. I don't really want to work where I'm working anymore. I'm going to reinvent myself and I'm going to become the expert on digital music. And within two years of getting back, I was running the digital business for BMG and was one of the top five music executives in all of North America. So for me, that was my big breakthrough moment, and it set me on my course and my career path in a direction that I wouldn't be sitting here today with you if I hadn't gotten through the elk herd and gotten out there and made my decision.

Alison Dean:

That's an awesome story, and I also appreciate you allowing me to reminisce on my days of Columbia House. So thank you so much for that, Kieve. It's not every day you get to hear those words. Okay. So given your background across tech, media, entertainment, I want to know what led to the launch of Engager.

Kieve Huffman:

Sure. So I was running an agency eight years ago where I was bringing together LA-based tech companies and New York based media companies. And I was kind of bringing together my two worlds because I've been working in the LA Tech scene. I think that's actually Alison, when we met

back in the day at some of the events and some of this early tech startup days. So I was kind of helping to do that. And I was sitting around at a dinner with around, I don't know, maybe like a half dozen other entrepreneurs that I've been working with in various capacities. And we were all saying, well, what do you think's going to be the next big thing? And we all said weed. And we didn't really know what that meant. This was pre-legalization of recreational here in California. There were only a couple of states that were even legal at that time, but we just all had a sense that things were going to really progress and we weren't really sure what that meant.

So I took some time and it turned out that three of us out of that dinner ended up deciding to go ahead and create a media company called Prohibited Media. We were one of the first websites to really do sort of professional quality content. We were trying to bridge the gap to the mainstream. We created the first multi-platform video network for cannabis content. We had a video production studio. We worked on a ton of different brand projects as well, because people would come to us and say, hey, we need help with our brands. And it was during that time that I realized that the brands that were being created in the cannabis industry were not put together and not created in an organic and authentic way that most brands in other industries were put together. Particularly when it comes to like a CPG type business. It was really more like product focus.

It's like, oh, we already have this amazing product. We have the best this, that, or the other, and now we need to get it on the shelf. So we need a brand. And it wasn't like, who's my target audience and what products make sense to delight that audience, to help that audience, to support that audience in an authentic way? And so we incubated some brands in house there, and many of those brands I brought with me when I eventually broke off and spun off into Engager brands.

So just focused primarily on creating brands and really wanted to focus on creating brands that not only had an authentic connection to audiences, but also had international appeal. Because due to the way that the regulatory structures and the legalities have worked out, most brands, at least in this country are very state by state. And to me that's very shortsighted. A lot of these brands, when things do finally open up, they're going to have a hard time expanding and really becoming national and international brands. And there's music fans everywhere. So that's what I ended up doing with Engager Brands, is I kind of created music genre focused brands for cannabis consumers.

Alison Dean:

It makes perfect sense to me, Kieve. So what does a typical day at Engager look like for you? And I know in your bio you have a sporting lifestyle because of your son. So do you have a morning routine that assists you in getting ready for your typical Engager day?

Kieve Huffman:

First thing I do when I get up in the morning is I go to my quiet space and I meditate. And I've been doing that for a couple of years now, and I find it to be super helpful to just sort of get my day ready, clear my head, start in a really good place.

I also have some affirmations and manifestation statements that I go through to help keep me focused and keep me inspired. And then from that point, I kind of go on with getting ready for work. And I have my son, he's 14. I take him to school and then after I drop him off, that's when I start the day at Engager. And honestly, that is all over the map because we're an early stage startup. We're running lean. I'm the CEO, I'm the head of marketing, I'm the head of sales, I'm the

head of everything. And also the lead janitor, whatever it takes. So it kind of just depends. Sometimes I'll spend the whole day just doing calls. Some days I'll try to set aside and just catch up on work, whether it's doing spreadsheets or strategy work. And then other days I'll be out on the road and it's really important that I go out and meet with strategic partners.

Kieve Huffman:

It's really important that I go out and meet with strategic partners. And then, because we're an early stage company, always raising capital. So, also there's a lot of times where I'm out taking investor meetings and I always prefer to take those meetings if at all possible in person.

Alison Dean:

Oh yeah, that makes sense.

Okay. So, continuing a tradition of what we have here where we ask a question from a previous guest, we're calling this segment the Breakthrough Club. Our past weeks guest was Sarah Tyone and she's managing partner at Therom One. She has a two-part question for you, Kieve. Is there any difference in branding strategy for lifestyle products like cannabis versus other types of consumer products like cars or TV?

Kieve Huffman:

Is there any difference?

Alison Dean:

In the branding strategy.

Kieve Huffman:

In the branding strategy, there are lots of differences, yes. So, part of what you have to recognize when you're creating a cannabis brand is that you are creating a brand that you're only going to be able to market in very limited ways, because of a lot of the restrictions that are out there. Not even so much around the legalities, it's around the terms and services of a lot of the platforms, right? There's a lot of things, for instance, we can't buy Google AdWords. We can't buy ads on Facebook. We can't buy ads on Instagram. We have to get creative on how we get the word out.

So, when you're creating a brand, you want to keep that in mind because typically we try to create brands that, because they're lifestyle-focused brands, they don't scream weed to you out of the gates, right? It could be sort of any number of things. And part of the ways that we also kind of get around having the restrictions that are put upon us is that we do a lot of marketing and branding around our ancillary products where we don't have those same restrictions, like t-shirts, and hoodies, and hats, and accessories and different kinds of merchandise. So yes, I think there's a lot of differences because when you're branding a car or any other CPG item, you don't have to think about any of those things kind of going into it.

Alison Dean:

How has technology been a factor? I think given obviously the restrictions with some social media sites, et cetera. Her question is, how has technology been a factor in cannabis marketing and

sales, especially legalized in many of the US states, but not all of them? So, to your point, even more restrictions.

Kieve Huffman:

Yes. One of the biggest challenges that does occur in this industry, and it's definitely the hardest industry I've ever worked in bar none, because of all the different restrictions. And when it comes to sales and marketing, obviously the fact that you can only sell and market on a state-by-state basis is extremely challenging, right? There are some tools that you can use technologically that help particularly around mobile, doing geofencing and different things where you can target messages, knowing where people are. Those are some different things.

And then there's a lot of tools that have been created specifically for this industry because recognizing that there are so many challenges and unique needs. So, we use a tool called LeafLink. That is really our connection to how we help handle all of our sales ordering and customer CRM for on the sales side. And then when it comes to the marketing side, we do a lot of geofencing with mobile that I think is a little bit unique to other industries. And then, as much as possible, we try to use the technological tools that everyone else uses when they're available to us, but oftentimes, unfortunately, they are not.

Alison Dean:

You mentioned on our last call how important events are in your industry. So, having brand visibility at noteworthy events. And we were talking about QR codes and so touchpoints for a potential consumer on how QR codes are now leveraged at an event. That's another layer I think of creativity, where you're thinking outside of the box a bit on the things that are available to you, given the amount of restrictions that exist. It's interesting.

Kieve Huffman:

Yeah. Well, one thing where there are no restrictions really is on email marketing, right? So, collecting data is incredibly important. And also texting. There's far fewer restrictions. So, if you can get permission from people to allow you to communicate with them directly, then that really allows us to do a lot more. So, you're right, Alison. I would say where we're a little unique is that we're going out and marketing at non-cannabis events. Most cannabis brands are marketing at, I call it they're marketing within the bubble, because there's a ton of different cannabis-centric events, whether it be B2B or B2C events. And it also makes sense because we're music-focused brands, but we're going to where the audience is, right? We're going to the concerts, the festivals. And yeah, we use QR codes as one of the ways that we use to collect data. Usually we give some sort of an incentive.

It's like, you're getting entered into win a prize of some sort or something like that. And then we'll use that as our way to get the permission to be able to go out and directly market to these audiences. And quite frankly, because of the way that much of the supply chains are challenging to work with within cannabis, the more direct to consumer conversations and transactions that you can control, the better, particularly for a brand. So, this is another thing that's a unique thing for a cannabis brand versus a brand in any other industry. Because we're an intellectual property holding company, we cannot directly collect from the point of sale. So, we don't hold cannabis licenses. And we're doing that purposely because we don't want to be beholden to those licenses. They're very expensive to obtain and to maintain. And also, they're only for single states.

So, for us, we partner with people who have licenses and then we collect a royalty for our licensing royalty for the intellectual property. And then we handle all of the marketing as well as the sales. And because we're so far removed from the collection, sometimes it's hard to actually get paid. So, there's more and more of these services that are starting to come out in the cannabis industry that are really creating this D2C model where we can directly market our products to the audience and have them be able to transact directly. It's still through a third-party, but we control it. That's also better economically for us too, right?

Alison Dean:

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Kieve Huffman:

Because the fewer different people within the chain that are taking a piece of the pie, the better for us.

Alison Dean:

Less middleman is always better, right?

Kieve Huffman:

Exactly. So, that's kind of getting back to your point. Those are really the drivers for why we're doing the QR codes at events.

Alison Dean:

Super smart to me. Okay. So, you talked about this already. You are one of the founders of the leading cannabis media company, Prohibited Media. What are some of the greatest lessons that you've learned from working in cannabis so far, given that it's the most challenging industry that you've encountered?

Kieve Huffman:

Well, one that is somewhat related to cannabis, but I think is also just related to any industry that goes through this sort of irrational exuberance phase. So, my last company, we were able to raise an incredible amount of money. It was over a secure period of time, but the majority of it was raised in a two year period-

Alison Dean:

Wow.

Kieve Huffman:

... in what they called the Green Rush. Because Canada had just gone legal and California had just gone recreational legal. And it just felt like there was this big momentum going on. And the only way that you could invest if you were a retail investor was to go onto the Canadian public markets where a bunch of those Canadian companies were traded. And so, there was all this money that was getting thrown into it, and these companies got ridiculously overvalued. And they knew that

the end game was here in the US, because they were all Canadian companies. And so, they started investing in a bunch of US companies, including ours. We were one of them.

And when you get caught up in that whole game of you got to get bigger ... Because the investors are like, "Well, how many employees do you have? How big's your office?" It's like, I think back on it now, and especially coming out of COVID, you're like, how ridiculous was that on a way to build a business, right? It's like, yes, we got up to 80 employees. We had an office in Toronto. We had a 9,000 square foot office here in LA. And I think back on it now, and I just think back on our burn rate during that time. I was like, that was completely unsustainable, but it was all built on, "Well, you just got to get big as fast as you can. More money will be coming in, so don't worry about it."

And when that more money ended up not coming in, because it always goes this way, the boom and then there was the bust at the end of 2019, then we had to go and do some really painful things like let go a vast majority of our family. When you're 80 people, I mean, it's still a pretty small company, it's pretty painful. We had to let go of a lot of them. And that's around the time that I spun off as well, because I didn't like the way that some of the things had kind of gone down, especially as it related to how ... It's always the employees that end up bearing the brunt of a lot of these things. And I felt like this could have been handled a little bit better. But that being said, that was a huge lesson. It's one that I'm abiding by now, which is like, don't try to get too big too fast. Just grow in smaller phases. Make sure that you're building a sustainable business. So, that does kind of fly in the face very much of the Silicon Valley way, right? Of just like, "Oh, profitability. Don't worry about."

Kieve Huffman:

... on Valley Way, of just like, "Oh, profitability. Don't worry about that. Just get as big as you can." But in cannabis you don't really have that luxury, because quite frankly, there's not that much investment capital coming into the space anymore. So if you're not prudent about how you're running your business, then you're not going to survive. So that was a big, big lesson. I think it could apply to any industry, but it was particularly something that I had felt for the first time, because it was the first time I'd been a part of a company that had raised significant amounts of money. My earlier startups, I'd either raised smaller amounts or it was more or less self-funded. So that was probably my biggest lesson. And then there were certainly many others that were just more related to some of the things that we were talking about, just the specific challenges of running cannabis businesses. But I think for your audience, maybe that's a good one to kind of throw out there.

Alison Dean:

The bumper sticker that was flashing in my brain as you were saying all that was, lean and mean. Keep it lean and mean.

Kieve Huffman:

That's what we do right now, we're lean and mean. That's what I was saying before, it's like, you know what? I don't hire another body until we're bursting at the seams and literally if we don't hire another body, then things are going to completely get out of control. And let's organically build this thing. And yeah, it's being lean and mean and scrappy and bootstrapping it and all those kind of startup terms. And I've been on all sides of it. I've worked for the big companies, I've started my own companies. I'm comfortable in all of those areas.

I'd say the most gratifying thing is though, and this is what I'm most looking forward to with this current business, is once we do get to the next phase and out of the bootstrapping phase, it's happened to me a couple of times in my career. It's such a gratifying feeling to have come up with an idea and gutted it out and scrapped through it. And just all the moments where everyone rational around you is telling you, you should have quit by now and you don't. And yet you somehow get through and you get to that phase where you, "Become successful," is a pretty amazing feeling.

Alison Dean:

Right, absolutely. Okay. So you touched obviously some very compelling initiatives at BMG and many other companies. I'm curious, what does transformation mean to you?

Kieve Huffman:

Really what we're going through in this industry, and I've been in it now for eight years. It has been a transformative experience. We've gone through the highs and lows, we've gone through all these different challenges, and we're still not kind of through it yet because we've still got a lot of the federal restrictions that are put upon us. So for me, what's happened in the transformation that has happened, is that it is forced companies to have to really focus on just what are you really good at? What are you really strong at? Where do you truly add value into the supply chain? And just super focus on that. And then also because this is a new industry, it's hard because it's been around for a little while, but it's still super nascent. It's at the very formative years and we're in the first or second inning of this industry, is how do we work together to create something that has a foundation for this industry to be built upon so that it actually can sustain the challenges that will come down the road? And how do we want it to be as an industry?

And I'd say when you're looking at industry ride transformation, I've experienced it now a couple of times. Back in the day, the transformation from analog to digital was very challenging. Because I was one of five decision makers, but yet none of the other four decision makers and myself, we couldn't actually have conversations together because of antitrust issues. So we actually had to be really careful if we were ever in the same room we were not supposed to be, because it would be considered colluding to kind of fix prices or fixed business terms or all those things. We each kind of had to figure out on our own, and then collectively, it kind of filtered out as to how that transformation was going to be. And unfortunately, the way that transformation ended up going down was not pretty. Because there were people like myself that were very much on the side of, there's been no greater opportunity in the history of recorded music than there is now. Look at all this pent-up demand that we haven't been fulfilling, that has now been unlocked with all these new technologies that are out there.

Unfortunately, what ended up happening, and I experienced this when we merge with Sony, and then I think most of the other major companies also have, is that a lot more of the more traditional business people kind of got involved and the lawyers got a lot more involved. And their whole approach was, how do we put this genie back in the bottle? And I don't know if you remember, but it was like they started putting copy protection on the CDs.

Alison Dean:

Oh, yeah.



Kieve Huffman:

And they started suing the customers for downloading music off Napster. And it was obvious the way it turned out now, but it's a big reason why I left the industry when I did, because I was becoming the squeaky wheel. So for me, transformation is also a lot of realizing what you can control and what you can't control.

Alison Dean:

Well said.

Kieve Huffman:

And figuring out the best possible outcomes for your company and your industry, based on all of those sort of macro movements that are happening, whether it be technological movements or whether it be in user behavior movements, or in that case it was combination of both. And kind of going through a similar thing now with cannabis, where it's like, okay, we kind of went through this thing where it looked like things were going to really happen quickly, but now they still haven't. We're still federally illegal, even though we're legal in some way, shape or form in 38 states now, still don't have access to banking, still don't have interstate commerce. So how are we as an industry going to transform to prepare for what's coming, but also build up sustainable businesses in the current reality? It's incredibly challenging.

Alison Dean:

You're really living within the transformation right now.

Kieve Huffman:

Yes I am.

Alison Dean:

Okay. So what comes to mind for you as the most memorable project that you've been part of and why?

Kieve Huffman:

Wow, there's so many.

Alison Dean:

I know. I feel like this is a hard one for you, Kieve. What's the first one that pops into your head?

Kieve Huffman:

The first one that popped into my head is when I was running the new media department at RCA Records, RCA was tasked with coming up with a way to reposition Elvis Presley. Because we had been using his back catalog as a cash cow. The company had just been putting out these really haphazard, thrown together compilations. And at that point in time, his reputation was kind of the fat, bloated Elvis at the end of his career. That was in people's memories of Elvis. So we were going to come out with this thing called Elvis Number Ones, and it was a greatest hits. And the whole thing was like, look, how do we make Elvis cool again? Because he was a badass back in

the day, so how do we remind people and introduce the new audience to that as well as sort of reintroduce that to sort of an older audience? And I was part of the team.

And eventually what ended up happening is I created the whole digital marketing plan for North America, and it was so well received that it ended up becoming the global marketing plan. And we ended up winning a bunch of different awards for the websites that we built and some of the digital campaigns that we did. I got to work really closely with the estate in Graceland. I got invited to go talk to the advertising council in Memphis, and they gave me a key to the city, which was pretty cool. If you ever need to get into Memphis, Alison, I got the key. You're more than welcome to come with me. Works anytime. It was one of the biggest rebranding projects that I've ever been a part of. It's taking an existing brand and how do you rebrand it into something else? It helped that we had a hit single that to go along with it, that was A Little Less Conversation song.

And there were a lot of other cool things, I can't take credit at all for all of it. But having been the person leading the charge on the digital and being able to travel all over the world, because everywhere in the world they needed my guidance, that was a pretty cool project and that was one that I'll never forget.

Alison Dean:

I love that. That's such a great story. And it also makes me think about, now there's even a Cirque du Soleil show, The Elvis Show. The legacy continues to just forever live on. Once you're a Cirque du Soleil show, Kieve, that's it.

Kieve Huffman:

Yeah. That's when you know you've truly made it.

Alison Dean:

Yeah, right? Okay. So we're going to do something that we're going to call the break on through round, which is sort of like our lightning round, Kieve of just like a feel good, get to know Kieve. Now that people already know quite some things about you. First thing that comes to mind, I'm going to ask just a bunch of quick fiery questions. Here we go. iPhone or Android.

Kieve Huffman:

Android.

Alison Dean:

Coffee or tea?

Kieve Huffman:

Both.

Alison Dean:

Okay. Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok?

Kieve Huffman:

Twitter for personal, Instagram for business right now because of our brand.

Alison Dean:

That's good. Favorite food?

Kieve Huffman:

Sushi.

Alison Dean:

Least favorite food?

Kieve Huffman:

Liver.

Alison Dean:

Favorite color?

Kieve Huffman:

Blue

Alison Dean:

Beach or mountains?

Kieve Huffman:

Where the mountains meet the beach.

Alison Dean:

Okay. Morning or night?

Kieve Huffman:

Night.

Alison Dean:

Superman or Batman?

Kieve Huffman:

Superman.

Alison Dean:

Favorite place to travel?

Kieve Huffman:

Colombia.

Alison Dean:

Favorite book?

Kieve Huffman:

One Hundred Years of Solitude.

Alison Dean:

A historical figure you'd like to have coffee with? Should I assume it's Abe Lincoln?

Kieve Huffman:

He's one of them, yes.

Alison Dean:

Okay. If you had one-

Alison Dean:

... again?

Kieve Huffman:

He's one of them, yes.

Alison Dean:

Okay. If you had one superpower, what would it be?

Kieve Huffman:

To be able to predict the future.

Alison Dean:

Ooh, that's good. Last TV show that you binged?

Kieve Huffman:

It's a show on Netflix called Club de Cuervos. It's a Mexican show and it's what I'm using to help improve my Spanish.

Alison Dean:

I love that. Favorite song on the radio right now?

Kieve Huffman:

Bad Habit.

Alison Dean:

Favorite movie?

Kieve Huffman:

That's in the theaters now? I don't go to movies anymore.

Alison Dean:

No, favorite movie. It doesn't have to be current.

Kieve Huffman:

I don't know. Apocalypse Now.

Alison Dean:

Favorite holiday?

Kieve Huffman:

Christmas.

Alison Dean:

Favorite candy?

Kieve Huffman:

Dark chocolate.

Alison Dean:

For good measure, favorite podcast?

Kieve Huffman:

Any podcast that has Alison Dean Frost as the host.

Alison Dean:

What are the biggest leadership lessons that you have learned?

Kieve Huffman:

Some of the biggest leadership lessons that I've learned are that talk is cheap, and you need to lead by example and not by words. It's fun now that I'm the parent of a 14-year-old. It's not that "Do as I say, not as I do." Having been a part of founding teams and have been sole founder, having been an employee of different teams, I am a big believer in leading by example. It's like, "Look, this is what I expect. The rules apply to me, the same ones that apply to you." Another thing is to be tough, but fair, to listen to your employees. I think an important one is to fire slow and fire fast. It's hard to find the right fit. Take your time to find that person, and if they don't work out, don't think you're going to be able to change them. It's pretty clear usually if something's going to work or not, and the sooner you rip the bandaid off, the better.

Alison Dean:

So true. Okay. So looking ahead, given that you've touched so many companies, brands, and industries, what projects are especially interesting to you as you continue in your career?

Kieve Huffman:

I alluded to it with my Netflix show, but I'm very interested in Latin culture. I've traveled quite frequently to Columbia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru, throughout South America and Central America. So for me, something that's a passion of mine is to create businesses within these other countries that support the infrastructure of these countries. I've met some really, really smart, driven entrepreneurs and just workers in general that I would like to be able to support. I'm actually doing that a little bit with my current company as I just hired my first team to help introduce my brands into Mexico. I've brought on board three people down in Mexico now, and it's just really trying to help support different cultures in Latin America from an employment standpoint.

Also, I just see there's just a big opportunity standpoint as well as someone that just is very interested in building brands and building businesses, that there's just a fascination with America, with U.S. brands and US companies throughout Latin America, really throughout the world, but in particular down there. So being able to be someone that can bring those opportunities, bring brands, bring businesses down to them is something that I'm working towards. I don't feel like I'll truly be able to do that until I'm fluent in the language, so that's why I watch shows like Club de Cuervos as I did my very first podcast in Spanish a couple of weeks ago, and it was unexpected. I was supposed to be on with my business partner down in Mexico, and she was going to be the translator. She ended up getting caught in traffic, and so I had to do the whole interview myself.

Alison Dean:

Oh, my gosh.

Kieve Huffman:

Apparently I did well enough that I was not laughed off the podcast. It was one of those things where it's like, "Oh, wow, maybe I'm a little closer with my Spanish," so it was pretty cool that I was able to somehow get through that.

Alison Dean:

That's amazing. I'm very impressed. Okay. Are there any future innovations or is there future tech, anything on the next frontier that you're particularly excited about?

Kieve Huffman:

I am excited about the metaverse. I haven't jumped into it yet because I feel like it's still so early, but in particular as it relates, so I met this incredible team down in Columbia that has created a metaverse for different cities in Latin America they've created.

Alison Dean:

Wow.

Kieve Huffman:

These guys are so sharp and so smart. They came and they saw me speak at a conference down in Columbia, and they sought me out and they were like, "Hey, we want to help create a metaverse for music and cannabis." So I'm like, "That's a great idea," 'cause talk about not having as many restrictions to how you can market and how you can access the audience. That being said, the more I looked into it, the more I realized that I just don't have the time and energy to be super, super early again, 'cause I'm early on so many things, and I feel like it's still super, super early on those metaverse days. There's just simply not enough of an install base there yet to have it be meaningful, and what form it's going to eventually take, I don't know.

But I am excited about it and intrigued by it because I do feel that not only does it open up a lot of opportunities for industries like my own, but it also opens up opportunities for interactions with other people. So as you've probably gathered, I love to travel and I love to meet people from other countries. You can meet those people in a metaverse. It brings together like-minded people from all over the world in a way that you can't quite have the same thing on a group Zoom call or on a Twitter thread or what have you. So I'd say the Metaverse is what I'm excited about.

Alison Dean:

Cool. All right. We talked about an early breakthrough that you had, but what about a recent breakthrough?

Kieve Huffman:

So a recent breakthrough for me would be, I'd say the expansion into Mexico. So we activated our brands, meaning that we had a booth set up and we sold our apparel and merch and did our data collection at a festival in Monterrey, Mexico. It was the Machaca Music Festival. There were 40,000 people there, three different stages, all different kinds of music. Apparently, I wasn't told until after the fact that my business partner down there was petrified that we were going to get shut down the entire time. I'm like, "Why?" She's like, "You don't realize this is the first time that cannabis brands have ever publicly been marketed at a festival like this in the whole country of Mexico."

Alison Dean:

Wow.

Kieve Huffman:

She's like, "I didn't want to tell you to freak you out." I'm like, "I'm glad you didn't tell me that, actually." But it was like, "Wow, that was really cool. That was a really cool breakthrough. It was like we broke new territory."

Alison Dean:

Right. Right.

Kieve Huffman:

From that, we got so much interest from the promoters of the festival that we got invited to another festival that we're going to be doing in Toluca, which is just outside of Mexico City. It's a three-day festival, 80,000 people a day there over three days. It's the first time I've ever created my own brands and had them go international.

Alison Dean:

Right.

Kieve Huffman:

I told you about the Elvis thing. That was an international project, but obviously that brand had existed for quite some time. This is the first time that my brands have actually gone into another country in a big way.

Alison Dean:

All right. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that I should have?

Kieve Huffman:

I don't know. Alison, you got a lot of questions, a lot of in-depth thought-provoking questions. I'm glad that you're transitioning your podcast 'cause I love the digital transformation, that whole angle to it. But I do agree with you, and I think it's smart that you've gone to the more broader transformation 'cause digital, it's ingrained. It's part of any transformation that's happening right now, right?

Alison Dean:

Right? I totally agree. The sky is the limit, Kieve. The sky is the limit.

Kieve Huffman:

There you go.

Alison Dean:

Well, we thank you so much for being on The Breakthrough. I hope it was a breakthrough.

Kieve Huffman:

I broke on through to the other side. Thanks for having me on. This was great.

Alison Dean:

Thank you for tuning into this episode of The Breakthrough. Be sure to subscribe on your favorite platform and follow us on Twitter and Instagram @breakthroughpod. I'm your host, Alison Dean. Until next time.