

BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL JEWELRY BUSINESS WITH MEGAN AUMAN

Hello and welcome back to another episode of She Means Business! In this episode, I was joined by the lovely Megan Auman. She creates absolutely beautiful jewellery. I love hearing behind the scenes of how she's turned into a big success. One of the biggest takeaways is the fact that as entrepreneurs is to show up and take action. We don't have to have it all figured out. We don't need to be able to see the whole path. We just need to get going and test it all out. That's how we can create lots and lots of success. Anyway, I hope you enjoy this episode and love it as much as I did. It is honestly so inspiring.

Megan, it is so good to have you here. Welcome to the She Means Business podcast!

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

I am so excited, too, because so often, we have service-based businesses here rather than product-based businesses. Obviously, you have a beautiful jewellery line and I am so excited to talk to you about it and go behind the scenes of how you created a successful jewellery range. I can't wait.

Yes, so excited.

In these interviews, I like to pretend that there is a movie coming out called She Means Business, obviously. This movie is starring you, Megan Auman. It's all about your entrepreneurial journey and how you turned your dreams into reality. First, I always like to set the scene for all listeners. What kind of vibe or feeling would your movie have?

Oh, that's such an interesting question, particularly because I feel like the vibe of my brand and the vibe of my life are so completely different. I actually live in a really small town in Pennsylvania. I live in this super-rural area, farmland. My studio is actually on a property that's 10 acres. There are cows; they're not my cows — we rent the property out to a farmer. I have no idea how to farm anything. I have this very light, bright, airy studio and really live in the country, which where I grew up. But my brand vibe has this much more urban, New York kind of thing. It's not super, super edgy — I'm definitely not that kind of edgy — but it is more urban and it's much more black, white and gray. If we're going to set the vibe of my life, it would really be about this contrast between these 2 different vibes that are happening in my life. I also tend to feel much more at home in a city. Even though I live in the country, I really think of myself as a city girl. When I go to New York, I feel like I'm home. I swear my blood pressure drops when I see the New York City skyline. I'm about 3 hours from New York so it's a pretty easy day trip for me. The vibe would really be about this contrast of these 2 very different elements of my life. I think contrast is a big theme for me anyway. It's an idea that I play on a lot in my jewellery line so that's probably a good place to start. It might make the movie a little visually disjointed, but I'm sure a good director could fix all of that.

Definitely, it's going to be an amazing movie. Your home sounds dreamy, by the way. How nice to wake up and be there in the countryside.

It's funny because it's definitely a "grass is always greener" thing. I have all these dreams of moving to New York or living in a big city. All my friends who live in cities are like "What? You have 10 acres in your property? You're living the dream!"

It's always like that, isn't it? The grass is always greener. The movie starts playing. It's the first scene. This is you right back at the beginning of your entrepreneurial journey. What is the story behind why you decided to become entrepreneur? What would the scene be like?

My entrepreneurial really actually starts in childhood. My dad owns his own business. It was a machine shop founded by my grandfather. I always grew up in the business world and I actually would play business as a kid. I remember I had this bead loom. I had a recipe box full of index cards where I was keeping track of what it cost me to make these beaded bracelets and how much I was going to sell them for. I found it recently as I was cleaning things out and I was like so undercharging. I actually started my first business in the 4th grade. I made confetti by literally punching holes in coloured paper and I would make these little confetti packets and sell them to the other girls in my class. I think I had figured out that lunch cost \$1.25 and everybody's parents gave them \$1.50 or whatever it was. I actually charged literally the change that people got back from lunch. I made up a price for confetti packets. Clearly, some part of me was very aware of value-based pricing right from the beginning. I'm sure the janitors hated me because girls would then stuff the confetti in notes and past them in class and confetti would explode all over your desk. That was actually my very first business.

I've always had this really entrepreneurial gene, which I feel very, very thankful for. I'm very thankful that I grew up in this environment that wasn't risk-averse. One of the things that I often find with people is they don't want to take the leap. They're like "I don't understand how you do that" but it was so normal in my world. I remember my mom one time telling me she had to go to the bank to co-sign a \$500,000 loan with my dad so he could buy a new machine for his business. That was my normal: taking on debt, taking on risk. I always felt super-comfortable with that, which I feel very, very grateful for.

It's a big thing, isn't it? My dad is really entrepreneurial. Growing up with that has made a big difference to me because it was just my reality. You can build your own business. You can do whatever you set your mind to doing. That was literally my reality. It just changes your life, isn't it?

it really does. You don't have to have that moment of "Should I make the leap? Should I step out of my safety zone or comfort zone?" I never had that because for me, the fear is actually having to get a real job. I've never had one. I've never had a job where I had to show up from 9 to 5 every day. That, to me, is more terrifying than any risk I've ever taken for my business.

I love that. Also, I was thinking I don't necessarily think that it has to come from a parent or anything like that. For anyone listening "Oh no, I didn't have parents like that." You can find inspiration and support from so many different places. Especially now with the Internet as it is and Facebook groups galore, it's crazy how much support is out there.

Absolutely. I do want to say that if you didn't have that, if you didn't grow up with that, it's fine. Most of the people I know didn't grow up with that, especially where I live in a really conservative area and small town, it's so abnormal. It's not a prerequisite, for sure, but it's a nice little bonus.

Definitely. How did you then transition? You started businesses as a child. How then you really get into it as an adult and build your first proper business?

My mom was actually an artist so, I always say that what I ended up doing was a combination of both my parents because my dad had a machine shop and my mom was a painter. I thought I was going to college for painting. I actually took a class in high school where we made lost wax cast rings, which is a really simple way of making a silver ring. I thought "You go to college for this? Sign me up. That's amazing!" So, I ended up going to college and getting my BFA in metalsmithing. Because I honestly had no idea what to do with a BFA in metalsmithing, I went straight to grad school and got my MFA. I started teaching when I was in grad school. The whole time I was in grad school, I was playing out these 2 different scenarios. Either I'm going to be a college professor because that's a pretty standard thing that happens after you get an MFA — you try to teach in college.

OK, either I'm going to be a college professor or I'm going to run my own business. I was doing things in grad school that were setting me up for both of those things. I was teaching classes in grad school but I was also developing a production line. We had this fantastic program in grad school — The Jewellery and Metals Coop. Any student who was in the jewellery program could participate. We had sales twice a year. I ran the coop. Not only was I responsible for selling and marketing my own work, but I was trying to get other people involved and try to help them sell their work as well, looking at pricing and packaging. It was a really wonderful opportunity to start to develop my production line. Coming out of grad school, I was really fortunate because I got a one-year teaching position as a full professor. I was a sabbatical replacement so I went in and taught for a year. I always tell people that the biggest thing I learned in that year was that I did not want to be college professor. I feel really grateful that I learned that right out of grad school a year out and not try to be an adjunct and pay my dues. I did teach as an adjunct on and off for a long time and I do still love teaching, but I knew instantly that the bureaucracy and the environment and even though you didn't have to show up to work every day, I just couldn't deal with that kind of thing. OK, this is not what I want to do; that means I'm going to run my own business and I'm just going to figure this out.

I started out mostly by doing craft shows because that's what everyone in my field was doing. Basically, my business philosophy starting out was like "What are other people doing and how do I do that, too?" The way that I figured things out was I was going to look around. People that graduated from the graduate program that I went to a couple years out who were running a successful production business. OK, she's doing the craft show circuit so I'm going to start applying to craft shows and doing that. It turns out I also hated that. It seems like this great romantic life. Really, what it was was you travelled to Reston, Virginia, which is about as exciting as it sounds. You'd set up your tent and then it would rain and it would be windy. That was really awful. I did the Renegade Craft Show in Brooklyn. At the time, they had the show in an abandoned swimming pool. It was this old 1930s WPA-era giant swimming pool that was empty. Sometimes, they

would do concerts and things in it. They set up the craft show in the swimming pool. Then this awful storm came up. Of course, the pool starts to fill with water. I'm standing in an inch of water, holding on to my metal tent to keep it in from blowing away in a lightning storm thinking "There's got to be a better way to make a living. This is not what I want for my life." Right around that time, I had discovered trade shows. There are these big shows that people go do a couple of times a year. Stores come and they place orders and you can sell your work to stores. The first year that I did a trade show, I made 4 times more money than I did that year at craft shows. I was like "This is it. Trade shows — that's for me. This is how I'm going to build my business."

That is so cool. I love the fact that it was a case just trying different things, looking around at what other people are doing to try and follow a pathway. You were trying and testing and realising that some of those things weren't for you and figuring out what was for you. So often, people don't stick at it. They do something because they see someone else doing it and they think it would work for them, too. Then, it doesn't work for them and they think it's the end of the road. Instead of keeping moving forward, they find themselves feeling stuck. So, I love how you had the progression to figure out the right formula for you. Once you started doing the trade shows and you started to create more success for your business, what other things did you do to help you really grow it and take off the ground?

There are a couple of things. I do want to add, too, that everything from the teaching to the craft shows, even though those things didn't work, I still consider them hugely valuable learning experiences. In fact, doing craft shows for a couple of years really helped me doing trade shows because it gave me so much one-on-one feedback from customers about what they responded to in my product line and it really helped me develop my product line. I know a lot of makers now who want to jump just straight to selling online; that's really the dream. Quite frankly, that's my dream, too. That's something

that I'm working towards because it's really great. The problem with only selling online is that you don't know what customers are responding to because you don't get that feedback. People at a show, they're so not subtle. They make faces, they make comments. They think you can't see them through the wall of your table or something. That was a hugely valuable experience. In trade shows, it's the same thing. You still get the feedback, but you don't get it as often.

When I started my trade shows, I started at a really interesting time because I did my first trade shows in 2008/2009, which was the height of the recession here in the US. It was pretty dismal — I'm not going to lie. I moved to this bigger section in the New York Gift Show in 2009. You can throw bowling balls down the aisles. There was nobody there; it was so brutal. But I also have this mentality that somewhere in this recession, there are people that are making money. So, why isn't it me? What do I need to fix? When I started doing trade shows, one of the things that I realised about myself is that I had never worked a retail job. In college, I had always worked food service. I was scooping ice cream. I was a waitress. I did all these food service things but I had never worked retail so I never really understood anything about retail. Here I was trying to sell to stores and something felt off. I felt like I wasn't a great salesperson and I didn't understand. So, I actually went and got a part-time job at a retail store. Because I live in the country, the options were pretty few and far between. I actually ended up going to the J. Crew outlet, which was a really great decision because they train their sales staff really well. They involve them in the selling process. You learn what numbers they are paying attention to every day. I learned how to upsell and what ADS meant, which was average dollars per sale for anyone who has never worked retail. It gave me this newfound confidence in selling and it also gave me language that I could speak to my stores. It really improved my trade shows because I could speak the language. I could say, "You should add these earrings because they're a great upsell" or "These things are really going to round up a line for you" or "Let me show you how these pieces merchandise together." Yes, at the time I was also reading a lot of books on sales and I was really

trying to figure that out. But going and getting some sales experience without the pressure of it being my own work was a really smart decision.

I think that's the other thing: it's easier to sell someone else's stuff than it is to sell your own because you have all of this baggage. You're the one who designed in and feel so strongly about it. But you also feel sometimes awkward. You don't want to brag because you're the one who made it. There is all of this crazy psychology tied up in selling something you make. It was really nice to learn how to sell. It was a brand I liked but I didn't have all that emotional baggage. I was just someone who used it and like it. I was able to then take that skill and turn it on my own products. If I'm just my own biggest fan, how would I talk about this work? How would I sell it? What would I say to the customer? What would I encourage stores to buy? It really changed my perspective on selling. It made me so much more successful at shows. I went from being a person who's like "I don't know, please buy it" to "OK, these are the 6 pieces you need and this is why you should get them. These bigger pieces are a risk but it's going to anchor the collection. It's OK if it doesn't sell, I'm always happy to exchange." It just really changed the way I talked to stores and made a huge impact for me.

That's such a smart move that you did that. Again, I love the fact that it's coming back to the whole concept of trying and learning and growing. That's what we're all doing as entrepreneurs because none of us have all the answers.

Exactly. I'm not going to lie but every so often, I get really angry. I want the blueprint! The thing is there isn't a blueprint right now. Everything is changing so fast with the internet and the way people buy. I have to remind myself that my motto of "Try it and see," most of the time, that's the right motto. I just have to go with it, even though every so often, I just want someone to tell me what to do.

I used to and still do sometimes, I just want someone to hold my hand and just show me what the bloody hell to do. How can I make this work? Give me the shortcuts. But there really aren't any, are there? It's trial and error.

It really is. We're all just figuring it out. Sometimes, it's helpful to hear other people say that. I don't always know what I'm doing, but the most important thing is I'm always doing things, I'm always trying things, and I'm always experimenting to see what's working.

That's what sets successful people apart from people who don't quite make it. The people that are always taking action to figure it out even though they don't have a bloody clue what the heck they're doing, it's those people that have the breakthroughs at some point.

Exactly.

Not the people that just sit back thinking "I don't know what to do. I need to get help." They just freeze and don't actually do anything until they got someone to show them the way.

I think there's this big culture of over-thinking that happens. I know I'm guilty of it, too, sometimes. At the end of the day, the thing that's always moved my business forward is just doing something, trying something, trying the show, sending the email, putting new work out there, whatever it is. It's always the action that gets results. It's worth thinking about it.

Along your journey, have there been any twists or turns in the road that you didn't expect?

One of the things that's hard for me and I think it's hard for a lot of creatives, artists and makers is focus. Focus is definitely an issue. It's been an issue of my business a couple of times. A couple of years ago, it actually happened after my mom passed away. My mom

and I were very close. Like I said, she was a painter. I basically had my year when I wanted to be painter and I hardly made any jewellery. I started painting and I was really needing to work through my grief — there's no other way to describe it. Because I'm a maker and because I have stuff online, I thought I'm going to share my paintings, which then turned into selling my paintings, which then turned into a textile line. It was this whole crazy departure.

While I certainly don't regret anything because I never regret anything — everything is a learning moment — I realised that it's really hard to manage multiple brands and it's really hard to have such disparate things. It's really important if you're a creative who's actually trying to build a successful brand, focus is essential — you really have to have it. It sucks because there are so many fun materials and supplies and processes. In a perfect world, you could do them all. In a perfect world, I would do them all. I love painting, I love textiles, I love sewing, I love jewellery. I love pretty much anything except ceramics. I have no interest in playing with clay; I have every interest in just buying other people's pretty clay things. You get so excited about all these other materials, but it's really hard to build a brand. For me, I found that every so often, I have to steer myself back on track with the jewellery line and say, "You do love jewellery. This is the thing you love. This is how you make money." It's not to say that you can't have hobbies, but not everything has to be for sale in your brand.

Yeah, I agree with that so much. It's a massive downfall of entrepreneurs. It's shiny objects and wanting to hop from one thing to the next, not only with the products and services you're creating with, but the way you go about marketing it. People just aren't focused. They want to be doing it all at once, which leads to nowhere.

Exactly. Every 2 seconds, you hear "Oh, Instagram is the new Facebook. It's the new SnapChat. It's the new video. It's the new blah-blah-blah." It's so easy to get distracted by that stuff. All of these platforms have millions and millions of users. They all have enough

to sustain any of our small businesses. Pick the things that are smart and right for you and ignore the other stuff.

Yeah. We have to literally commit 100% to a strategy and stick at it. It's true what you say about products. At the Female Entrepreneurs Association, we have the Members Club. I've focused on that to the exclusion of pretty much everything else off my book for the past 3 years. So many people were saying, "Why didn't you create this? Why didn't you create that?" No, because I want to focus on building this up. I'm making this amazing, not to say I won't move on to something in the future. That's the thing: people want it all, they want to have everything, and it's not a great strategy for having breakthroughs.

It's so much. I've tried to manage multiple brands. I had this other product for a while called the Cozy Cuff, which was a laser-cut felt coffee-cup sleeve that also doubled as a bracelet. Do I sell it under my name? Do I make it another brand? You do all these things and it pulls you in too many directions and you're only one person. Even if you have a small team, focus is just better. At the end of the day, it's what your business needs. There are a few people who may be good at doing side projects and letting them grow. Tina from Swiss Miss also runs Tattly and a couple of other things. She's the person that comes to mind who somehow manages to build multiple brands. For most people, you just got to pick something and go with it.

I agree. Obviously, you've created so much success. You've created an incredible jewellery line. You are stocked in stores throughout the US, which is just really amazing. Going back to the movie, what does your life look like now that you've created this life for yourself?

It's funny because I actually feel like I'm very much in a transition right now. Even though I built the success and I have the stores, something was feeling a little bit off for me. I realise I needed to bring a little bit of creativity back in my business, which is not the

same thing as lack of focus. I realised I have fallen into a rut with my jewellery line. I wanted to be a little bit freer in the way that I design. I wanted to make more one-of-a-kind work and I wanted to release more products, play and have more time in the studio. I'm actually in the middle of a big transition in my business away from so much wholesale. There was a time when wholesale was 90% of my business. Now, I'm shifting more to selling online. Part of that is because wholesale is getting harder. There are fewer stores. Trade shows are not doing as well as they used to. Part of that is because, honestly, it's easier for buyers now to just buy things off the internet. Stores don't need to go to shows as often as they did. That model is definitely in a little bit of a transition.

For me, there is a personal transition happening where I just want a little bit more of that freedom. The challenge is it's actually really hard to grow an online product-based business. I want to say that because there's a myth that it's super-easy. "I made 3 things and I'm going to stick them on Etsy. If I'm not a success in 12 minutes, I'm going to be a failure." I don't sell on Etsy anymore but that's where I started online. I started my Etsy shop in February of 2007 and I didn't sell a single thing until June of 2007. It's almost 6 months of nothing. It's been a very slow growth in my online sales, but that's really where I'm putting my energy. I realised for me, at the end of the day, I mostly want to spend my time in my studio making things. I went through a period when I wasn't. I actually had an employee who was doing most of the production for me. I found that when I stopped doing production, I stopped designing new jewellery. That coincided with the time when I was doing a lot of painting. I realised that I really want to be hands-on in my studio. I'm working to shift my business to really support that and support me getting in my studio playing and experimenting. That's a product of we change, we evolve. The market changes and evolves. I'm definitely not the kind of person who's like "I did the wholesale thing and that's me forever." It's not who I am. Now, I'm in the middle of this transition, but it's been great. It's helped me understand how I want to spend my time.

There's this push in the maker community where the goal shouldn't be to be in your studio. You're running your business and you want to have someone else make the work. That's what I was working towards. I thought about it. You don't spend 7 years metalsmithing because you don't want to be a metalsmith. I had to take that stuff back and really re-evaluate what I wanted out of my business. I think for a lot of my peers, the answer will still be to go back craft show circuit. As I mentioned at the beginning, I hate craft shows so I'm really now all about growing and expanding my online business and really working.

It's just really exciting, too. You get this personal connection with your customers. I use Shopify as my sales platform. One of the things that Shopify does with your customer data is it pulls someone's picture if it's available through their Google profile or something. When I ship out orders and I see someone's picture, it's like yeah, I'm sending this to another human. That's so cool!

It is amazing, isn't it? The online world is so incredible how it completely transformed the way we can run our businesses. I'm so excited for you. What an amazing transition that you're in the middle of. Where can everyone go and check out your jewellery?

They can find me online at MeganAuman.com. I am also at MeganAuman on pretty much every social media platform. My favorites are Instagram and Pinterest; clearly, I'm a visual girl so you can follow me there. Instagram is if you want to see what's new and coming down the pipeline. I've got a lot of new stuff I'm working on. That's definitely the place to follow me.

To close out your movie, let's end with a profound statement. What would you close out your movie with?

Let me think about that for a second. I feel like I don't want to close out the movie. I want it to be this idea that the potential is always there to evolve and explore and

change. Maybe the end of my movie is me heading off in a different direction or jumping on a plane to go somewhere, even though I'm never going to move away from my tiny time. Just this idea of having continue to evolve, that's really important because as people, we evolve. I don't want to be stuck running the same business that I was running. I'm in my mid-30s and I started my business in my mid-20s. I'm not the same person I was then, so I don't want to run the same business. I think the same is going to be true when I'm in my mid-40s and when I'm in my mid-50s. I really just see the movie continuing on with this permission to evolve. It's going to be like *The Fast and The Furious* where it's now 8. We're just going to keep finding these different iterations and going for it.

I love it so much. It's been so interesting hearing your story. It's been so inspiring. You reinforce the fact that we can all create so much success if we just take the action, stick at it and try to figure it all out. Megan, thank you so much for coming and sharing your story with us.

Thank you so much for having me. For anyone who's listening, just dive in. Whatever you're thinking about or considering, just dive in, do it and try it and see.

Exactly. I hope you've all loved this as much as I have. Head over to the website, leave a comment and let us know what your biggest takeaway is. I will see you next week for another episode of She Means Business.

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