



THE BARCODE PODCAST Episode 002

Tucker Max: Getting the Right Attention for Your Brand

I'm Ben Ponder, and today, we're revisiting one of our Barcode events from a few months back.

Our guest in this episode is Tucker Max. Tucker is an author and the co-founder of [Scribe Media](#) - a company that helps people write and publish their books. Prior to founding Scribe, Tucker had a couple of memoirs on the New York Times bestseller list and knows a thing or two about our topic today - getting the word out about your brand.

So often, I advise early-stage consumer product companies who believe that if they can just get the right publicity, the right article in the newspaper, or become one of Oprah's favorite things - all of their issues with their business will be solved. But as Tucker shared with our live audience, and as you're about to hear - it's just not the case. People care about how your product will solve their problems.

And a quick note, this is a recording of a live event...and the guest is Tucker Max...so there is some colorful adult language throughout the conversation. Just giving you a heads up in case you need to grab some headphones before you listen.

BEN Tucker founded a company that's now called Scribe Media. Tell us what it is, just in a nutshell.

TUCKER Right, so we help people write and publish their books. Basically.

BEN Un-unlocking the world's wisdom? Is that-

TUCKER Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, yeah. Right.

BEN Right? So the idea is that there's a lot of people who have uh fascinating experiences and insights who for whatever reason, uh, the, the idea of-of writing a book is, uh, feels beyond them.

TUCKER Right.

BEN And so, uh, you have, uh, an entire infrastructure and team-

TUCKER Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

BEN Uh, wrapping around you to help you do that.

TUCKER So are any of you guys Tiffany Haddish fans? Right? So we did her book. Um, we did the writing, Simon and Schuster published it. Uh, and then you guys David Goggins fans, right? We did his book as well. Like hundreds of others, but those are the two biggest probably that you guys would know. It might be a few others, but those are the two biggest.

BEN Sure. Cool. Okay. So, uh, so that, that's what, that's what Scribe, scribemedia.com.

TUCKER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN Uh, you can check that out. Um, so, so I think one of the things, like, for a lot of startups, uh, attention, the right kind of attention feels very distant from them, right? They're, they're slaving away-

TUCKER Right.

BEN In the, the proverbial garage-

TUCKER Right.

BEN Or, or kitchen.

TUCKER Right.

BEN Um, when, and you know, so the, the kind of base topic here is not just like, how do I do it.

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN But like, why? Like when does it matter? Give, give us your thoughts on, uh, like for a startup. Again, you've advised-

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN And been a part of these folks and who, some of them did it well-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN Some of them didn't.

TUCKER All right. So most of you are in the very, very early stages, right? Okay. All right. So I'll try and gear my sort of thoughts that way. When you are early stages, I see this mistake a lot. People just like all of you, they'll say, okay, I've got this cool product. How do I get attention? And then I'll start asking questions. I'm like, how much have you sold?

And like, oh no, you know, I, uh, few things and I'm like, how much have you sold? How many stores are you in? Like I start asking them why. Basically, why does anyone care? And they don't have actually reasons, they, they haven't sold any or they've sold very little, right? Very little is effectively zero, right? They're in one or two stores like mom and pops or whatever, that they basically, you know, uh, uh, guilted their way in.

But there's no reason anyone's going to care, right? So let, like let me give you, this is like one of those hard sort of lessons that you don't want to be true, but if you accept it and face it, it's way better. No one gives a shit about your fucking products. I'm serious.

I tell every single author this, no one gives a fuck about your book. They only care about themselves and they only care about how your product is going to help them. If you cannot answer that question, then you, you need to figure it out. You need to figure it out or get out of that game, right? The only purpose of your product is to serve the people who use it, not, if you, for you getting rich and famous is a secondary impact of your product serving real people's real needs.

Is this clear? And everyone gets this in theory and then I start asking them questions a lot of times and they're like, "Oh, but I think..." and "I want" and "I, I, I, me, me, me." No one fucking cares, right? No one cares. No one cares.

And the sooner you realize that, the, the, the, the reason I'm like harsh about that is because the sooner you realize it, the sooner you will start listening to your customers, right? You will first talk to them, then listen to their feedback, then adjust your product based on their feedback until you have something that people actually want. Right? Is this, like, making sense?

Is it unclear? All right. I know it always makes sense in theory and I was like, oh yeah, I get it. And then we start diving in and it's like, no, they've missed, they're not listening at all, right?

AUDIENCE (laughing)

BEN Well and, and this is a-

TUCKER I'm not talking about you necessarily!

BEN This is a, that's right. And it's a very localized thing. It's a, a very common scenario here is a-a company says, "Hey, I'm going to hire a PR agency and we're going to get coverage in New York." And I go, "Are you sold in New York?"

TUCKER What? What do you mean? Why would I need to be sold in New York?

BEN I probably will be if I'm in the New York Times. Is that like, no, it's so, so it, it's, it's again-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN It's understanding the-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN Are, is your, like, what's the best outcome of this press coverage that, like you-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN I assume or I people buy your stuff, right?

TUCKER Let, let's talk about press.

No reporter gives a crap about you. They don't care. They only care about one thing. Can you give me a story that my readers are going to really like? If the answer is yes, then they want to talk to you. If the answer is no, you're just annoying them. End of story. They are judged on how well do their stories do and whether that metric is readers, clicks.

But the point is do readers care. Right? And if you have an answer for that, then they're going, they, they're going to knock down your door. If you don't have an answer for that, you can bug them all you want. It's not going to get you anywhere. Right?

That, that clear as day, you have got...This is one of those weird things that like, um, it took even me a while to understand in business, but it's like, it's, it's that, that's kind of the moment when you make the leap from wannabe to act-, "wantopreneur" to entrepreneur is you understand that everything you're doing in business is about the person who's paying you to use your product. And it's not about you. You only win secondary. Same thing with media, same thing with hiring. Like it's all-

BEN And, and, and, for those of you who've come a lot, you, you've me harp on this. Same thing with marketing.

TUCKER Yeah. Same thing.

BEN Uh, your, your marketing messaging-

TUCKER Yes.

BEN If it's all about me, me, me, me, me.

TUCKER No one cares. No one cares about your product!

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER They don't. I don't, um.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER The, the yaupon tea people. I just tried, tried the yaupon tea. I love it. Right? If you talk about you and your tea, I don't care. What I want to know is what your tea can do for me. Right, right? Is it like a, like I didn't, I don't think I tried yours. I'm not sure what I tried. I don't actually know. Right? Because I don't care.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER I only care, no, seriously! I don't. I don't care about the brand until it's really good. Right? And then I'm like, oh, this is good. What is this? Right. Then I want to know because I want to buy it again.

[Smart Sweets](#). I had that and I was like blown away. It's in our cupboard now. Our kids are obsessed with it. We don't let them eat sugary stuff. No sugar, super healthy. I, I, I don't, I didn't even know it was from Vancouver. I don't care. Right? But I know what Smart Sweets is because it makes my life better. My kids get to have a treat. They feel like they're having a treat. I get to make sure they don't get lots of sugar and are hyperactive before bed and all that terrible shit. Right? I win. That's why I know what [Smart Sweets](#) is.

BEN And so the stories that people tell, like the effective stories, and this, uh, uh, just to be clear, this guy's a storyteller.

TUCKER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN He's not advocating that you don't tell any stories because nobody cares.

TUCKER No, no, no, no.

BEN The best stories are stories, even founder stories. The, the best founder stories are stories that allow your audience to read themselves into-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN Into the story. That's where it's really powerful.

TUCKER There's a fantastic book about this. Um, and you guys know Donald Miller's, there's a [book out right now. It's, it's called StoryBrand, right?](#) And, and Donald Miller. There's a lot of these books. Donald's is just one that, I know Donald, I've read his stuff. He's not a client of ours, but um, uh, uh, his book's really good.

And the basic [StoryBrand](#), right? The basic idea is, um, you make your customer the hero of your story, not you. Right? And he kind of explains how to do that. And one hero's journey is he goes through all the sort of stuff, but like, like, uh, [Smart Sweets](#) is a great example.

Uh, if I was doing their marketing, the marketing would be something like, at least one part of the marketing would be, you're a busy parents, busy mom. Your kids want treats, they deserve them, but you don't want them to have sugar and all this terrible stuff. What you give them, it's easy and it's actually a treat, right? Solves that problem. Right. And then, I'm the hero as the mom or the dad because I'm giving my kids a treat that they deserve. They picked up the room, they did whatever they're supposed to, but it's good for them, right? Not, hey, look at us and our cool candy. No, no. It's, here's how you can be the hero of your house.

BEN That's good. So, uh, traditionally speaking, the, like, um, a lot of communication stuff gets uh divided up into these two buckets, loosely advertising and PR, uh, which has, has become known as, uh, like paid media and earned media.

TUCKER Paid media, mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN So how, uh, at an early stage, how do you think through paid media versus earned media?

TUCKER Um, so I would, uh, generally speaking early stage, I would stay as far away from paid media as you can. And I, I mean, paid like paid ads, paid media. Uh, samples and stuff, some people call that paid media. I don't. Samples are very different. Right? Um, I would stay very far away from it. There's a couple of reasons why.

One, you probably don't have the money, right? Uh, if you have the money, it's a very poor use of resources, two. Three is if you are, first off, you probably, paid media probably won't work for you when you're a small CPG. Right? The fourth reason is even if it does, if you're getting customers with paid, you don't actually know if you can get customers. It is a, it's like taking steroids and saying you're a big guy. Yeah, maybe, maybe not. Right? Uh, same thing with pay, pay the steroids before you, before the time.

Right? There's a time that makes sense, I think. I don't know, that's what pro athletes tell me. Some you should take steroids, but it's not early.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER Um, uh, I don't know when you're like, you're a major league pitcher and you got to recover quickly?

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER At least, I don't know. Uh, I didn't make it to the pros, so I don't know. Uh, but, uh, I never got to the lev-

BEN That's right, that's right.

TUCKER The steroid level. Um, but no, I would avoid paid, very far. In fact, I would avoid most marketing early, very early stage until you know you have product market fit. Until you know, like this is a product that when people who, who want what, like if, if you want sweet stuff that's healthy, if you want an alternative to coffee, if you want a healthy uh, juice, whatever, like people who are looking for something that, that you're selling, eat your thing or drink your thing or use your thing and like it and want it.

Until you have that product market fit, I wouldn't do hardly any marketing that's not samples, customer in hand, try this, look at them and, and getting feedback from them. Until you've talked to a lot of your customers-

BEN So.

TUCKER You're wasting your time.

BEN Product market fit is not a fit with everyone.

TUCKER No. No, no, no, no.

BEN It's, it's a, it's a very focused strategy. How do, how do you determine like what that is?

TUCKER Um.

BEN Like, how do you find those people?

TUCKER So, I hate to say this, but I gotta be, I gotta be honest. Um, look, product market fit is usually, not always...What I'm about to say might crush some of your dreams. This is just a hard reality. Product market fit is usually when the market pulls the product out of you, right? When you basically cannot keep it in stock because it is so good. It, it meets such a demand. I mean, [Siete](#) hit this, like we, you, we were there. We saw it.

Like, even before you worked there, we, we saw. Like they couldn't keep in stock. Even when we had that dumb ass name, Must Be Nutty. Right? When I had to tell them they were Mexican.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER Like this is absolutely true. I'm the dude who told the Garzas they were Mexican.

BEN Fam-, famous story, they uh, Miguel and Vera, give credit to Tucker for uh, telling them in a very Tucker way-

TUCKER (laughs)

BEN That I don't want to buy Italian food from you. I don't want to buy bread from you. Guys.

TUCKER You're fucking Mexican.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER I want to buy tacos and tortillas and chips-

BEN And-

TUCKER And salsa.

BEN And, and, and, I-

TUCKER And hot sauce.

BEN Had been saying this in a polite way for a long time and Tucker's special delivery, they were like, you're right. We are!

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER It's true. No, it's true. Um, but like, uh, I-I-I don't want to say as soon as you do your first thing, it has to fly off the shelves or you don't have product market fit. That's not true. That didn't happen with, with the Garzas. Like it, it can take a little time to find it. Right?

But my point is, you know you've found it when you're like, oh my God, how do I get this into all these stores? How do I meet this demand? When you, when your wife or husband are like, how

are we supposed to cook dinner? You're just making the pa-. You've taken over all the kitchen, whatever, things like that. That's product market fit. Um, basically-

BEN And, and don't convince yourself that you have product market fit.

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN You'll know it. It's like-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN It's unequivocal.

TUCKER Yeah, yeah. The, the, the worst mistake you can make, and the, I say this in all entrepreneurial arenas, tech, publishing, CPG, doesn't matter is you get your identity tied into your idea. Like, oh, I think this really cool hemp oil, uh sock is going to be amazing.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER And it's like, no motherfucker. It's not. That's stupid. Right? And like, and most of you, your friends won't tell you because you're so excited and whatever. And most of you don't have friends like me who are just like, no, that's fucking stupid. Don't do that. Uh, or if you do, you're like, I don't want to ask Tucker, he's going to be mean.

And so then you'll like, you ask people who are super nice or you, or they kind of try and tell you like Ben will and you don't listen because you're convinced this is the right thing. When you can, when you, whenever you stop paying attention to reality, that's when you start to fail as an entrepreneur. Right? And I, I've noticed I've been guilty of this, right? I'm not sitting here saying I've never made that, I can tell you cause I've made this mistake many times.

Um, if you are paying, that's why I tell you talk to customers, listen to them because they will in one way, if you are open, they will always tell you the truth. They may not always tell you directly, but like you'll know, you know, like people pick up your sample and they just put it down or what, I'm like watch, watch them. You'll tell. They, they will, you can tell if you're willing to endure and that will hurt a little bit.

But the easy way to do it, to say, okay, my job isn't to make this specific iteration, my identity. My job is to find something that serves people. Then your identity is, and then it's very fluid and it's like, oh, okay, who cares if this didn't work? The next thing will, or maybe the next, or I'll just keep going until I find the probiotic drink that people freak out over.

BEN And the other element of that, which is like, not to put sampling and discovery aside, but you don't really know. A, a lot of you, you're passionate, you're founders, uh, you're very good. Even if you don't think of yourself as a salesman or saleswoman, you're very good at selling your product because you know the story.

Uh, how well does your product sell when you're not standing right there?

TUCKER Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN Is uh, like, because if you want to be in a thousand stores, you're not going to be standing there at every shelf-

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN And you may be really good looking and, and, and great at, at schlepping this stuff. But it's, it's not how it really works.

TUCKER The other big product market fit thing you'll see is when you get people recommending, people you don't know, recommending your product to people you don't know. Huge. Word of mouth is like in every business. Word of mouth is essentially how you hit escape velocity.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER People talking to other people. And if you don't have that, you're not part of the market fit.

BEN So one, uh, it's kind of a, uh, this is an earned media thing, but I know you've worked with uh, brands who have done the Shark Tank thing.

TUCKER Yes.

BEN Why?

TUCKER So, all right, so here's the argument for Shark Tank. You are going to be on TV. You are going to get a lot of exposure, you are going to hit a spike of sales and you are going to have credibility going into, uh, uh, whether it's um, co-packers or buyers or whatever, it is, uh, a credential you can put on. There aren't just a lot of credentials in CPG, like external credentials. Um, which in some ways makes it cool.

It's like either you succeed or you don't, like no one cares about credentials. Shark Tank is kind of the only credential maybe, uh, I can think of. Um, that's the argument for. The argument against is, it is a lot of time. Uh, they're all motherfuckers, like seriously. Like what happens on the show.

BEN I can't, I can't watch it.

TUCKER Is utterly, it's utterly irrelevant to what happens after the show.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER So like, um, uh, uh, I'm an advisor to [PrideBites](#) who was in, um, uh, one of these courses, they, they went on Shark Tank. They got a, a deal from K-Kevin and Lori I think. And then of course I was advising them on the back end throughout the, the thing. I mean it was months of back and forth.

You have all the leverage on like in the, in the room. As soon as the deal's made, your leverage is gone. All of it. Right. So then they have all these backend terms, ridiculous, ridiculous shit, like liquidity preferences and just crazy. Like, man, I forget, I talked to somebody the other day who just went through and they sent me the, like the, it was like the 8, 80 page turn, terms sheet, 80 pages. And basically, they-

BEN And that's not the deal.

TUCKER Only-

BEN That's not the deal.

TUCKER No, no like...

BEN That's the basic framework of the deal.

TUCKER Like dude, it was so bad. So bad.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER It was the worst. And so that's why I, that's why my advice to them has always been go on, be really nice, on the show, on air. Like, you know, go back and forth, like have fun, right. Come to any deal you want. Like understand the deal terms that you're willing to have, come to any deal you want, and then realize you can always get out of it after the show. Right?

It's really simple because they film, whatever it is. If they film a hundred episodes, they're shooting, they're, they're, they're putting like 97 on the air. You've got to do something really bad for them not to put your episode on. Right? Um, anyway, so, uh, for most people I would tell you Shark Tank is not a good, it doesn't, it's not worth it.

Um, okay. So [Tower Paddle Boards](#), is, it's Stephan Aarstol, uh, it's a friend of mine, he did a book with us. He was like one of the big hits. It's not, like and I'm [crosstalk 00:18:47].

BEN Correlation, not causation?

TUCKER Right.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Well, it-it worked well for him. Right?

BEN Okay.

TUCKER But he was one of the first stand up. Like, it's like, it's very much a lightning strikes thing. Everyone thinks, oh, it's sort of like most of you went to college, right?

And like probably coming out of high school you thought, Oh yeah, once I get out of college I'm going to be great.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER And I, yeah, no, that was wrong. Shark Tank's the same way. Shark Tank's the exact same way. Um, everyone talks about the few people who did really well. I'll tell, like, I know, I know Mark Cuban really well. Like one of the actual Sharks. He'll, he talks about this all the time with me.

Um, he's lost money overall in the aggregate. The only reason he still goes on is because of the personal branding

BEN It's brand building.

TUCKER Yeah, exactly. Like he, he's pretty much-

BEN You all know who Mark Cuban is.

TUCKER Oh, I would hope.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Like he's the only actual famous person on the show.

BEN Right.

TUCKER Or at least famous before the show made them famous. But, um, uh, he, he basically doesn't like, he doesn't, he'll take them seriously because he's hoping he's going to hit one of those that actually pay for everything. But in like, like uh he did Tower Paddle Boards, a few others, the investments themselves that made money. In the aggregate, he's lost money in the aggregate, just, you know, dollar for dollar on Shark Tank.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER So like, it's not. If you have the sort of brand where, uh, it's an e-commerce based, people, they don't know about it, but if they know about it, they're going to buy the shit out of it. Then Shark Tank maybe makes a ton of sense. Right?

But if you're selling like a lot, most of you make no sense on. First of all, you won't get on, but it would make no sense even to try. You're just wasting your time.

BEN So, when you meet a, a startup founder and you start talking with, with them, uh, how do you know when somebody's spending their time well and when, like, how they're allocating their time as a startup founder wisely and not chasing after shiny objects?

TUCKER Who's the guy who said he hates sales? Was that you? Uh-huh.

AUDIENCE Uh, I didn't say I hated it, but I said. [crosstalk 00:20:46]

BEN It's not his strength.

TUCKER Yeah. Okay. That's one of the red flags. (laughs)

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER For me. I've invested in about 80 companies and I'm, I'm done trying to pick on you. Uh, but like, uh, like w-when I heard that, I was like, ooh, like uh, uh, someone like, so let me give you red flags.

I don't like sales. Um, I feel awkward talking to people. Uh, like your product has to be so off the charts. If you're any of those sort of introvert type things, um, unless you, if you're the only founder, if you have, uh, if you're the introvert and-

BEN If you can recognize that about yourself.

TUCKER And you-

BEN And you surround yourself with other people.

TUCKER No problem. Part of a team. Right?

BEN Right.

TUCKER Um, what are other red flags. If they ask about Shark Tank? Red flag.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER No, I'll tell you why.

BEN No, and I, I brought that up because it's super common.

TUCKER Right.

BEN At, at, at Siete, people always get like, have you guys considered going on Shark Tank?

TUCKER No. I've had, what show was that? No, you should do it. Is that on TV? To fuck with you. Um, I'll tell you why. Because if you ask about Shark Tank, it tells me that you care about this. You're in this for ego and not for service.

And I don't mean service like I'm heart-centered. It's like that's a red flag too. If you're, I'm heart-centered, that means you're full of shit. If you're a, I care about Shark Tank, that means you're in it for your ego. Either extreme are awful, because that means you don't care about the people you are serving. And if you don't care about them, you're going to have a shit product.

BEN And I want to piggyback on that. In, in my experience, I see founders who are laser-focused on making a wonderful product that serves a need. And I see other founders who try to do that, but really deep down they just care about being famous.

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN Right? So, and, and I, there, that's a sort of fork in the road. You could maybe go down the famous path if you have fame credentials or whatever. But like, if you're, you know, Jeff Bezos is not like, he shouldn't be famous necessarily. His personality does not necessarily lend itself to fame.

TUCKER No.

BEN But he's so successful in our culture that makes him-

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN Really famous.

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm (affirmative). No, um, yeah. If you want to be famous, don't take entrepreneurial, right? It's not the route to take. It's just not. Like, cool, you want to be famous? Cool. Then there's a lot of ways to do that.

I can, we can talk about that. I did that, right? I, like a fucking movie. I had a movie made about my life before I turned 34, so I know about that shit. Um, it's totally different than starting a company. They are unrelated things. Seriously unrelated. In fact, I would almost argue that they're in some ways antithetical because all the best entrepreneurs I know are deeply, deeply focused on the customer, right? Product people sometimes are and sometimes aren't. There's some weird product people who actually don't care that much about the customer, but they just have that intuitive instinct, right?

Like Steve Jobs was that, like, he actually hated most Apple users, right? That's just who he was.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER He did like, it's not even like, but he, he understood aesthetics and like his, what he cared about aesthetically worked with products. So it just kind of worked. Product people can be a little bit weird, but I, uh, I mean like I'm starting the business. This is what I care about. And sometimes you're the product person, sometimes you're not as the entrepreneur.

So there's often overlap, but not always. Um, but all of us entrepreneurs I know, all the ones I've invested in that hit home runs, all of them were obsessed really with two things.

First, the customer. Customer. Product is a way of serving customer. They actually weren't obsessed with product, they were obsessed with serving the customer. And the second thing that the, the really good ones were obsessed with, are the logistics and mechanics of business.

Now, if they hated that, then they were obsessed with finding the person who was obsessed with it. One or the other. You've got to, you either have to be the one obsessed or you have to be the... You guys know, um, *Traction* like Gino, uh, Wickham, right? We just did his latest book. Uh, his book is, entrepreneurial operating systems is like kinda his thing. It's fantastic for like learning how to actually run a business. It's probably the, the thing I would recommend the most. Um, he divides up sort of entrepreneurs or founders into like visionaries and executors. Right? So like I'm like, almost an iconic visionary.

Mike, we got to about 2 million with Scribe and then the fucking wheels came off and broke because that's when you have to start to become a professional organization. You have to actually run the mechanics of your business. Right? And we got lucky. One of our clients was a big CEO in town and he was tired of his old thing, and came on board with us and now we've 10, 20, yes.

BEN You wrote some blog posts about it.

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN It was a humbling moment for you.

TUCKER Very humbling.

BEN To, to hand over the, you know, like, I'm not going to be the highlight.

TUCKER I, I aspired myself as CEO of the company and he stepped in, um, because the man knew how. He had already scaled businesses. He knew how to, he knew how to do what we had to do, right? And so it, it was, for me, it was very clear. I can condense all of it down.

If I believed in our mission and in serving our, our authors, then I had to step aside as CEO and, and have him run it. I can still be in the company and do my thing, but I had to step aside to CEO. Right? If it, if it was about me, then I could stay as CEO.

The ones who are trying to be famous and are bad at it, have been weeded out. If your big interest is fame, even if you're hiding it, you almost, it almost always forces you into making the wrong decisions, right?

You, you're hiring PR teams early, you're doing all this other nonsense that's misdirecting you from the things that, that, that create success early. The other thing is, um, I, I, I mean, I don't know you, but I know like for a lot there, dude, man, you're not putting money in.

I'm putting, fuck, I'm not any more. But for a long time I was putting money in. So like I had skin in the game and I had every incentive to know these people and I still had people fool me. You know?

They're, you know, I'll tell you why. Cause they fooled themselves. Like you can't fool me, but you can fool yourself by extension. Cause I'm reading what you actually believe. If you are actually fooled yourself, then, itself, that's a second or third layer of analysis I have to make on you. Right?

Which is, that's actually a lesson I had to learn. Um, you guys know the company Hinge, the dating app? Yeah. I was an early investor in Hinge and that should've been a massive success and that fucking CEO fucked it up so bad. And it was all because, and I, I'm not even that mad at him because I probably would've made the same.

BEN You sure?

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER How dare you question me? I'm the one up here speaking! Um. No, uh, uh, like I am both mad, but then also I kind of get it because at his age I probably would have. In fact, I did make a lot of the same dumb ass decisions. Right? So it's not like, um, but basically he, his ego ruined that company.

BEN I'll give you three examples. Uh, I'm going to keep these relatively anonymous because I don't want it to come across like I'm gonna-

TUCKER That's no fun at all.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

BEN I know, I know we're yin and yang here.

TUCKER (laughs)

BEN Um, so one of them, we had a, an early competitor at Siete who's, um, the founder, uh, put the founder's name on the product and I went, yes.

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN So there's one. Uh, the second one is after you've, you know, maybe you're at a show or something like that and you're having a drink with somebody and they, and, and you start to say, what, what do you really want? Like what, what's your goal? And if one of those top goals is to be on the cover of Magazine X-

TUCKER (laughs) Yep.

BEN That tells you.

TUCKER Yep.

BEN That tells you some things.

TUCKER Mm-hmm (affirmative).

BEN Um, and then one other one, I-I talked to some investors who they, they kind of ride or die with their, um, with-with their portfolio companies. And a company, uh, went public, did not do well going public. Uh, the investment firm didn't do as well as they should have done. The reason that the company went public is because the CEO had always fantasized about running a public company.

TUCKER (laughs) Oh, man.

BEN And this is a company that you've all heard of.

TUCKER Oh, man.

BEN So it-it does happen.

TUCKER That's so bad.

BEN It does happen a lot. Yeah.

TUCKER Yeah. No, I, like. It, uh, I, I, I, I know these mistakes completely because I've made them, and then I've invested in companies that have done, like, I've been around it. Um-

BEN Now, I want to pivot the conversation a little bit. I think you guys have done some really cool and interesting stuff at [Scribe](#) around, uh, really emphasizing culture.

TUCKER Right.

BEN Uh, why did you do that?

TUCKER Um, okay.

BEN Like why does it matter?

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's a great question. So first off, let me say when you guys are super small and trying to get traction. Um, worrying about culture is cool, like do it, but, uh, don't get too caught up in this because it's like you don't have a culture if you don't actually have the company. Right?

Um, and I'm not saying you have to sacrifice culture for company, but like I see a lot of young, small companies spending a lot of time like, oh, let's all do our vision boards. And like, motherfucker, you got orders to fill, you know, do that shit after the orders are filled and stuff. Like, okay. So, uh, that all that, that's, uh, uh, sort of, when the work is done, then, um, the reason we-we focus a lot on that was almost an accident first, man.

Like Zach and I, the co-founder and I, we used to every week help each to like say, okay, what, what do you think I did right this week? What did I do wrong? How can I improve? And we would just do it for each other, right? And, um, and then as we started hiring people, they would watch us do it and they were like, that's amazing. Can you do that with me?

And so then we would start doing it as a team. And then as we got a little bigger, it was kind of like unwieldy to do with like eight people. Right? And so then we started doing this monthly thing that we called, uh, strengths and obstacles. And so what we would do, and I've spent a lot of time in like therapy and all this other shit. So I like, I have a pretty good mind for this stuff.

Um, and so we would do this thing where we would literally sit in a circle, like in kindergarten, and then we would, for each person we talk about, all of us would talk about their strengths. So if like Michael was the center, like Michael, you like, you're a fantastic writer. You're always in a good mood and very specific, like, and write it all down.

These are the things and that person can't talk. And we all tell them, I really, I love showing up and hanging out with you every day, Michael. Things like that. And so when you hear, most people-

BEN You smell good.

TUCKER That would be kind of a weird strength.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER I don't know, but all right. Um, uh, uh, but yeah. [crosstalk 00:31:23] Uh, uh, but anyways, so, so we would write it out that, and honestly for most people have never heard people they know and care about, tell them what they, it's almost like what you would say about someone at a funeral, except you're saying when they're alive, right?

And so, uh, people just fucking loved that. And then we started adding on, um, obstacles, right? Like, so we do strengths, what do you want? Like what do you want from work? What do you want from yourself? Where do you want from your relationships? And then we would just like, okay, well then it, if you want to run a five minute mile, okay, great. No problem. Sure.

And then we talked about, okay, what are the things you're doing that are in the obstacle? Like in the way of that. It's like, well Ben, you know, you eat 8,000 calories a day. It's tough-

BEN It's true. It's true. It's true.

TUCKER To run a five minute or whatever, right? And so like, but if you don't want to run a five minute mile, then who cares? So we would, we started that and then as we grew, people kind of were like, this is like the...we would, it just, it became a part of our identity. Right?

And, and, and then we started getting corporate people in. We're now 35 or 40, 38 I think we are now, 38, 39, and we have a lot of people used to work in corporate stuff. And the weird thing is, man, is like, you spend enough time in the corporate world. Like, I don't know any other way to say it, you're almost like um, you almost had...I didn't spend any time in the corporate world. Well, I was fired after three weeks at a law firm, so I guess three weeks I spent.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER Um, but, uh, uh, it, it's like. There, there's like a level of trauma that they have that you have to almost, um, help them heal off of.

BEN PTSD?

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER No, no, seriously.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Like, like you, like not, I'm not comparing them to people who came, went to combat, but it's like a lower level.

BEN Sure.

TUCKER Like sort of like, they're like, oh, I can't talk about myself here. People. It's like, no, you actually can.

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

TUCKER And then that's when we started, we started hiring corporate people. We realized, oh, like what we started, just the normal way that we interact with each other and like, like helping people help and support each other. Then we realized this is not the way the rest of the world does it for the most part. Right? Um, uh, and then-

BEN So they were way outside of their comfort zone. Yeah?

TUCKER Right. And so then that's when we really started developing our culture. And a lot of what we did was antithetical.

Like it was who do we not want to be? So like our, our, you can look, if you go to Scribe, scribemediacom, you look at the bottom on it [crosstalk 00:33:42]

BEN And you have like a value and an inverse too, right?

TUCKER Yeah, oh, for everything.

BEN Right. Yeah.

TUCKER So a great example is one of our main principles is bring your whole self to work, which is like totally antithetical. Like the inverse is, most corporations are work and business or, or work and self or work and personal are separate and the two should never interact, right? That's the standard thing.

So for every principle it's like this is the, the, the, the inverse is what is either actually or de facto true at, at most places. Right?

BEN Right.

TUCKER And so, um, and then it ended up becoming like a recruiting tool. So we ended up getting, we get people who like are taking anywhere from 20 to 50% pay cuts to work with us, because not only do they believe in the mission-

BEN Well, you published it too, right?

TUCKER Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Yeah. Oh, of course.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER It's all online. You can edit it, actually. You can leave comments and stuff on it. It's not a family cause you can't get fired from your family. We can fucking fire you.

It is a business, right? But like, so we don't pretend it's a family, but it's like, it's almost like the level around the family. It's like mo-, a lot of these people, some of their very closest, real closest friends.

BEN Got it.

TUCKER But it's not, it's not like I'm a close friend in spite of the fact that we're work-. It's like, we've created a situation where we, it's essentially like, imagine if, imagine if work was a place where you were refreshed and recharged and you, people there treated you like a friend. Like, an actual, like they actually cared about you. Like what if that was work?

AUDIENCE Hey, are you guys hiring? (laughing)

TUCKER (laughs)

BEN (laughs) Always. Always.

TUCKER We are-

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER For like four positions-

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Right now. I'm ser-, go to scribemedia.com and look. Hit on Join the Tribe. It's the first button.

BEN So you were an early investor in, in, uh, [Deep Eddy Vodka](#).

TUCKER Yes.

BEN How did you know it was going to be successful?

TUCKER I tried it and it was amazing. I got shit-faced on it.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER And I'm like, this is amazing. So like, seriously. There's no more to the story. It was like a, uh, it was Derby weekend, 2010. It was like two months after it came out. It was only in like 10 bars in Austin and my buddy kept trying to get me to try this sweet tea vodka. I'm like, get, I'm not trying flavored vodka. You loser, get away from me. And he kept pestering me and I finally tried it. I'm like, this is amazing.

And then I like, you, you, you can just drink it like, like forever.

BEN Like sweet tea.

TUCKER And not feel anything until you wake up in the morning and you feel like you're dead.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER It's the worst shit ever. Uh, but it was amazing. And so then, um, he knew Clayton and so connected us and I was like, I-I-I hate to pull any lessons out of that. That was literally my very first investment.

BEN I know. That's why I brought it up.

TUCKER Right, and so like-

BEN Because that, that sort of-

TUCKER I fell ass backwards into a horseshoe factory.

BEN I know, but, but so, like, he seized on an opportunity. He walked down this path because he really likes some vodka.

TUCKER It was amazing. No, it was amazing. It, like it was the first flavored vodka I'd ever had that I'm like, I want more of that. And that was even before the, the, um, the Ruby Red-

BEN Which is better.

TUCKER Hmm, incredible. Like, uh, this is a how much of a dumb ass I was. I'm like, oh, you should stick with this sweet tea. Don't do other flavors. Uh, that was a, that was a bad idea.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER It's a good thing I wasn't running their company.

BEN That's right.

TUCKER Um.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Yeah. I mean, like, it, that was like, I just trusted my gut. I knew. I knew so-. I, I, I've had a few alcohols in my life.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER One and two, I know when something's good and not. Like, I like, whereas like if someone came up to me with a pair of Manolo Blahniks, I wouldn't fucking know if they're good or not. Like I don't wanna invest in shoes. The fuck do I know? Like look what I wear. Like I don't know, but the things I know, I know. Right.

At this point in the evening, we had our Barcode members ask Tucker some questions. A couple of the answers he gave were too good not to share, but the audience for this meeting wasn't miked – so I'm going to pop in here and share the question that was asked, and then we'll head back to Tucker's live answer to the audience.

Earlier in the evening, Tucker talked a lot about the importance of serving your customers. One of our members mentioned that she loved what he said about serving your customers, and that part of serving them is being kind and perceptive. She then asked, "I'm curious what your thoughts are on the competitor relationship, because we have some kind of cutthroat competitors, but balancing that would be kind to our customers."

TUCKER Yeah. Okay. Hold on. There's different things.

AUDIENCE Oh yeah.

TUCKER You're, you're, you are putting things together that do not go together.

AUDIENCE Okay.

TUCKER Kindness, fantastic. No problem with it. Perception like per-, uh, high perceptibility, right? Having good understanding and seeing things? Most people, those do not. They think kind trades off, right?

Like I like, oh well I want to be nice. Right? And so you don't. Don't, then you can be both kind and very perceptive, but most people, the-the kind will override the perception. Right. Okay? So that's one thing. The second thi-. That is a whole separate thing from co-, from competitors. I ah, now I'm gonna tell you two things that contradict, but as you get more advanced in business, you'll understand why.

Um, uh, how they like, uh, sort of every great truth, the opposite is also a great truth. Right? All right, so this is one of those. When you are young and small as a company, I would tell you, do not think about or worry about competitors. They don't matter. They do not matter at all. They have no bearing on anything under a certain size. Right? Cut.

Competitors start to, in CPG, competitors start to matter. When you get big enough, the distribution becomes a real, like a real a-a gate, like a gateway, right? Or a, um, a bottleneck. Right. When distribution is a bottleneck, that's when you have to get cutthroat because the world's changing a little. But it used to be basically there were only going to be five beers in Walmart and that's it. So to get on Walmart shelves, you had to get one of the beers off or what, it's not quite like that anymore. It's a little bit more abundant, but not much. And so distribution becomes cutthroat. That's when, that's when you have to worry about that stuff. Um, but until then, until, until the customer is literally taking something directly from you, don't worry about it. Cause, uh, if you're making a beer. Coors isn't taking shit from you, right? You've got to actually go take something from Coors. So don't even worry about them. Don't think about them at all. Coors is too big to worry about the customer.

You can, that's your advantage. Being small. You can be the David to their Goliath, is you can look the customer in the eye, you can actually respond to them.

BEN Just to uh, add onto that, I think that there is, uh, we, you know, competitiveness, we think about athletics. Um, certainly there are cheaters in athletics, but then we also know like good guys, good women who are very competitive, right? They're not satisfied with second place. They're not satisfied with losing. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're like evil or ruthless. They just compete with excellence and they like to win. And I think you can do, I think that those aren't like, uh, incommensurate with being a kind person in any way.

TUCKER Yeah, no, totally.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. No, I like, the, every minute you spend worrying about your competitor, you're not worrying about a customer.

BEN And the, and the truth is like this is the thing. You guys who, who come here a lot have heard me say a lot. If you're number one or number two in your category in a particular retailer, doesn't matter. Your competitors are irrelevant until with the caveat. That's sort of what, what Tucker was saying. Later, um, when you have some big people who have like people in the stores every single day, multiple times, and they can start moving your stuff out of the way?

TUCKER Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEN Maybe it becomes a deal. But for the most part, if you're number one or number two, if you focus on that product market fit and you're really nailing that, what competitor? It doesn't matter.

TUCKER Yeah. Then your competitors usually become buyers. Like they come to you. It's like, okay, here's a big checkbook. Write down a number. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah?

As Tucker mentioned a little earlier in the interview, he was an early investor in some CPG companies like Deep Eddy Vodka, but he's since gotten out of investing. There's a great lesson here about knowing what you're good at and what you're not and figuring out how to go after product-market fit when you see it.

TUCKER Um, what are some others? Uh, man I forget, dude. Like I, I'd have to look at my investments. Like you don't. The, the thing with it, it's why I got in and then why I got out, right, is that-

BEN That's an interesting story.

TUCKER Yeah.

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER So, so I got in, like, I, you know, I sold millions of books. I had a lot of money and I was kind of like, honestly, didn't really know what to do with it. I didn't want to do like stock market software. I was like, it was boring to me. And, and I had a lot of friends in tech and whatever. And, um, uh, like this, whatever. I missed on Twitter, like a buddy of mine, uh, I could've gotten in on that. And then the, the same guy, um, was going to invest in this, uh, weird company that like was calling people like from your phone to come pick you up. Like, this is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. It's fucking Uber.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER Right? Yeah, I know, man. Um, you guys know who Tim Ferriss is, right? That guy, right? Tim, good friend of mine, he tried to get me in Twitter and Uber. And so after I missed on Uber, I'm like, man, maybe I need to stop being an idiot. And then, um, then, uh, then that was when Deep Eddy. And so, uh, uh, like I put like a hundred grand in Deep Eddy in the, the first round, and then it like blew up and it started going.

I'm like, oh, I'm a genius. Like obviously, like I could, I should be investing in every company I find. And so I, uh, I've probably invested in 80 companies and, um, uh, all different spaces. Probably only 20, 25 of those were CPG maybe.

BEN And, and not all a hundred grand check.

TUCKER No, no, no, no, no.

BEN Just to be clear.

TUCKER I don't remember a lot of the losers cause who cares, right? I remember the winners, so like, uh, uh, Deep Eddy was huge, Thrive Market, which you guys know probably. Yeah. I was like, I think the first money in to Thrive Market or first five people. Uh, Palantir, which is probably the opposite of Thrive Market. They're pretty fucking evil, but it's done really well.

MeetUp. Um, a few others like that, like a, a, that...Slack I was in. Uh, Slack was obvious. I'm like, oh, this is going to be a massive home run. Um.

BEN And their, they had product market fit. They, it was-

TUCKER Yeah. [crosstalk 00:50:36]

BEN Like the user option was ridiculous.

TUCKER Dude, as soon as I got on, I'm like-

BEN Yeah.

TUCKER This is like, this is old school AIM except it's awesome.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER I'm like, Oh yeah, like this is, yeah. Um, but I don't.

BEN So why'd you get out?

TUCKER I got out because, um, if you want, like all things, all things investing, you've got, you have to have an edge to win. And I had, I had an edge and I mean, I got in Slack, like I know people in tech. I know people in CPG. I'm a smart dude, I can help. But, but my edge was like this and I'm competing against people who have edges like this. And it's like, ugh, that's, why would I compete in a place where I have a small edge when I can go into media where I've got a monster edge, like, and so, um, and then at the same time...I mean, I'll tell you guys a part of, you want to hear a product market fit story is my company.

Like I was at this entrepreneur dinner and this woman, one's a big sort of a retail agency, in New York. And she's like telling me, she's been trying to write a book for 10 years and how do I write it? And Blah, blah, blah. And I like, oh, she's like, she's, she said just try to write it. She hated it, hated writing, hated the publishing process. She's got a family and agencies, she's running this big thing.

She's like, how do I write this book without sitting down to write it? And I'm like, well you fucking can't. Like there's no way to write a book without writing it. Like it's literally in the word. And so I started making fun of her and like lecturing her about hard work and she like rolls her eyes out of her skull at me and she's like, Tucker, this is an entrepreneur dinner. Are you an entrepreneur? I'm like, yeah, of course. She's like, no, I don't think so because a real entrepreneur would help me solve my problem and not lecture me about hard work. And I was like, fuck you!

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER But she was totally right though!

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER And I was like, it was such a gut punch. Cause she called me out, but she was 100% right. And so I became obsessed with this idea. How do you, how do you get a book out of someone's head without their having to become, like open a vein on a typewriter or computer, yeah? Like suffer and all that shit. And then of course it took me like months because I'm stupid, but then I realize, oh, we've been doing this for 2000 years. They're called scribes. Like Socrates never wrote anything down. Plato did, right. Jesus never wrote anything down, the Apostles did. Like, well fucking Jesus can do it. Why Not Melissa? Which is that woman.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER And so, uh, I-I told her literally-

BEN And that's your money quote for the evening.

TUCKER Yeah, right. I told her, I said, I'm going to call you up. I know exactly how to write a book. I'm going to, I'm not going to do any research about retail cause I don't care, but I'm going to interview you and then I'll get it out of you and I'll ma-, turn your words into a book and she's like, yeah, exactly.

And it ended up working really, really well. I didn't think it would work, honestly. I'm like, Hey, let's try it and see. It worked great. And then she's like, you know, fantastic. Like what do I owe you? I'm like, I don't know, whatever, 10 grand, like I didn't care. I'm like, this was fun. It was a cool project. Like I feel good because I, I actually solved this problem. And then she's like, can I refer people to you? I'm like, for what? And she's like, to the same service.

And I'm like, what? No. Why would I? No. Why would I want to do this again? I already did. I already solved the problem. She's like, she like was kind of stuttering on the phone. She said, you don't want to do it more? I'm like, I guess, whatever. Fine.

So she started referring people to me and I'm like, these people are calling. They're like, Hey, can you help me write my book? I'm like, leave me alone. Like, I don't, like what are you doing? Like, you're so annoying. And so, uh, my buddy Zach, who became my co-founder, he's like, I'll help

you, I'll do it. I'm like, so I kind of taught him the process and he started doing these books and then I went on this podcast. You guys know [School of Greatness, Lewis Howes](#)? Like I went on like, and um, we were talking about something else and he, he's dyslexic and so I like, oh yeah.

And I told him this whole thing, and he's like, what do you call the company? And I'm like, what company? Like. And so I like, we, I made up something, uh, at the time, so we ended up calling ourselves Book in a Box, cause like I just, I had the dick in a box skit in my head, man.

AUDIENCE (laughing)

TUCKER Know what else to call it. Anyway, so, so, so then I'm like, uh, like I get an email the next day. It's like, Hey, I Googled, you know, Book in a Box. I can't, I want to use the service. I, and I'm like, who the fuck are you? Like the podcast isn't even up. He's like, oh, sorry, I run the editing studio that does Lewis's podcast. And I'm like, like, hey Zach, I think maybe we have like a business here.

He was like, yeah, jackass, I'm doing 10 books over here from one person. He's like, of course. That's product market fit. When people are literally writing checks to you for something that you weren't even trying to sell, or they're writing checks faster than you can sell it. And so like, uh, that story is both, I'm a dumb ass entrepreneur and also product market fit. Right? And then we kind of started the company and then it took off.

When people are literally writing checks to you for something you weren't even trying to sell, or they're writing checks faster than you can sell it - that's product-market fit. And you don't get it with the right reporter writing a feature on your company, you get it when you are obsessed with creating a product that will solve a specific problem for your customers. People don't care about you or your product, they care about the problem you're helping them solve. The attention will come. The company culture will come. Solve a problem first.

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