



Episode 017: Ryan Cummings - Carving a Specific Niche

BEN Welcome to the Barcode Podcast. My name is Ben Ponder and I'm your host. I'm excited to have Ryan Cummings with me in the studio today. Ryan is the founder and CEO of [The Bones & Co.](#), a next gen pet food company that we're going to get into and talk about his unique and, I think, really exciting approach.

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Ryan, Welcome, man. Good to have you here.

RYAN Super excited to be here, Ben.

BEN Yeah, I'm excited to talk to you too. We're going to dive in. As you know, we're going to start off. Obviously we're going to talk a lot about pet food today, in the pet space. But we are humans and we are talking about food still. Let's talk about your human food experience. Specifically, share with our listeners your best meal ever.

RYAN That's a good one because I definitely take set and setting into consideration for all those meals. But I think one that pops out is probably in New Orleans. I went to-

BEN It's a very foody city.

RYAN It is a foody city. I feel sad that the best meal wasn't in Austin, just because we have such a great food scene.

BEN We do.

RYAN But in New Orleans, there was Shaya, is a Mediterranean restaurant. It blew my mind. I think a lot of that has to do with the company. I was with my family and my girlfriend. We had a great weekend. The restaurant was just doing next level, very food centric Mediterranean food. They have a wood fire oven in house. They're doing all homemade on premise breads and dips. The meal and the service was just incredible. The lighting was great. It was beautiful day. We sat outside on the patio and had a great bottle of white wine.

Just having those fresh flavors, that complexity and depth of the food, ranging from meat to hummus, it was a memorable experience. I really appreciated the craft that went into the food and the overall experience from beginning to end. It was fantastic.

BEN That's awesome. Just kind of weird trivia, I think I've been to that restaurant.

RYAN Oh, yeah?

BEN I took my daughter there and it was so refreshing. I loved it too. It was so refreshing because we had been on this father/daughter trip to New Orleans. Most standard New Orleans food is just, everything's deep fried. Everything is deep fried. And so it was the first place we went to that I didn't feel like I needed to take a shower immediately after eating.

RYAN Have some fresh vegetables, a little bit of lemon juice in there, yeah. It was clean.

BEN That's right. It was a cleanse. It was a delicious cleanse. That's awesome. Thank you for sharing that.

You're a pet food guy, but let's talk very briefly about how you found yourself doing the [Bones & Co.](#) I know you came up schooling-wise, UC-Davis. Right? Which for people who aren't familiar with that world, is a uniquely strong agricultural school. It's one of the things it's super-duper known for. That's really where you came up. How did that translate to the early stages of your career? How did you get from that college phase up into starting a pet food company?

RYAN Yeah. When I look back on it, it is the seeds were planted with my childhood and my schooling. I was actually involved with Future Farmers of America in high school. I used to raise lambs for the fair. I think, looking back on it now, seeing how much of that had an influence on what I'm doing today is really impactful.

BEN Did your family ... Was that a thing? Did you guys have land and livestock? Was that part of your family culture or was that a thing that you gravitated to independently?

RYAN It was probably more of the community that we lived in. It was a very small rural community. That was what you did.

BEN Was it in California?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN Okay, yeah.

RYAN Yeah. It was in northern California in a small town called Grass Valley. A lot of it was we had a livestock coaching program, the debate teams, and it was a very robust leadership organization and training. It was great.

The route, once you got into FFA, is you'd have a project, a small business project. That for me was raising a lamb. You go and you pick up the lamb. You'd feed it and you'd show it out at the county fair.

BEN Right.

RYAN It was a rite of passage for everybody in the community. There was a big community support and fundraising associated with that, and scholarships. That was the introduction into it.

RYAN My first lamb was Paco Domini. It really, I think, impressed upon me-

BEN So you bottle fed it and everything?

RYAN Oh, yeah. You get it as a lamb and you raise it all the way up. What was impactful to me is you have a very short window. You're trying to most efficiently grow your animal. And so a lot of that has the quality of food you'd feed your animal. So from that very young age, you're looking at what we call is a guaranteed analysis of how much protein and fat and carbohydrates is in the food. Little did I know at the time that it would circle to what we're doing today. But yeah, it planted the seed.

From there, in high school, UC-Davis, as you mentioned, is a land grant institution. I studied agriculture and business. The two leading Ag schools in California, which is my undergrad was at UCS, and my Master's at Cal-Poly. Great farming and ranching programs, agricultural business and economics. So yeah, it was a great experience to continue from my high school days into college.

From there is really about the opportunities about how much food and agriculture play in our everyday life. That was the starting point of after having this education as to what do we do next from that direction.

BEN Right. You started to get involved in the pet food business. Take us from how you began to get involved in the pet food business to founding your own company.

RYAN As a young, ambitious 21 year old with my Master's, I thought it would be a great idea to start a consulting company.

BEN Okay. Why not?

RYAN Because I had years, years of experience.

BEN That's right. You had all the answers.

RYAN Yeah. I put my shingle out. I went up and down California knocking on doors. Surprisingly-

BEN That's pretty gutsy. I really like it though. It's just like, "Okay." I don't want to move past that too quickly because that's a pretty unique ... A lot of people, you've got an undergrad, Master's

degree in this sort of thing. You, I assume, could've gone down a path where you just tried to interview and get a regular job. But you decided to go out on your own even then.

RYAN Yeah. It was serendipitous in the fact that my Master's thesis, I circled up with the California Strawberry Commission. I was doing some work with them on some projects. I was like, "Oh, this consultant thing is kind of a good deal. Like you get paid by the hour and you can set your own schedule." It was super interesting projects. I found a niche in the agriculture space with my education and interests.

The problem was, I couldn't get a lot of meetings as a 21 year old. I had a very small network.

BEN It's hard to get people to take you very seriously.

RYAN Yeah. But hard, grinding it out, what my pitch was that was really successful was that I would have a meeting. People were interested because they're like, "Okay. Who's this kid who's going to sell me consulting services? I got ...

BEN Mr. Strawberry expert.

RYAN Yeah. I booked some meetings. It was amazing because I think what turned for me was the offering of value, right, with low risk. I would say, "Hey, just give me a shot. No fee. You pay me whatever you like feel comfortable paying. Like whatever value I add to you." That was actually the magic of how I got any clients at all. It was people were like, "Okay. Whatever." So I got an opportunity-

BEN Which is really great because that's actually the genesis of management consulting actually started with a guy who did that very thing. Right?

RYAN Really?

BEN He just said, "I'm just going to help you and you figure out what it's worth to you and then write me a check later."

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. I mean that was exactly it. I had some just interesting clients, off-landish projects. It was fun. I got-

BEN Always in agriculture space?

RYAN Yeah. All in agriculture. One of the clients was a pet food company. That opened my eyes to the opportunity of how we feed our pets and what goes into the food, and how those can be integrated in a more holistic path.

I definitely saw it from a larger ... As a consultant, I was working for larger companies. I saw also the degradation of some of those ingredients, and how money and growth really override the quality of the food. I always thought it was interesting, especially being from California. We're so connected to our food systems. Of how did that evolve to ... Really the pet food industry as it is today and as it was when I graduated, is the byproducts of the human food chain.

BEN Right. Right.

RYAN I think it really highlighted the fact that there's ... Peoples have changed the way that they eat, themselves, and also what they want for their pets. That's been my journey as well, is understanding that ... I came up from a unique experience of being more involved in agriculture and understanding production methodologies and how big Pharma and Agra businesses really ran those industries.

BEN Right.

RYAN People were going back to the roots of smaller agriculture, and they wanted that. There was a disconnect of why aren't we doing that for our pets? Why are we using these large ... I think people want to feed their pets the same way they eat. Right?

BEN Right.

RYAN There's that desire. Yeah, from my experience with that, it led me to seeing there is an opportunity for a food to be served to pets at the same quality as there are for humans.

BEN That fits into this broader trend that I usually describe as the macro trend of the humanization of pets. Right? That for most of us when we were, depending on your age, your dog or cat or whatever it is, was you were the owner. Right? Now, it's like pet parents and pet grandparents and all this sort of stuff. You're like the level, and it's every animal ate kibble and didn't matter, and they slept outside. It's just like there's a very different approach and mentality around pets, in general, in American culture and really beyond. That has really shifted in a pretty significant way over the last couple of decades. Right? That's where you begin to say, "What am I feeding my dog, or cat, or any other pet?" And, "How can I raise my own standards around, in the same way I'm trying to raise my standards for I as a human eat? How do I do the same thing for my pet?"

RYAN Yeah. No. It's absolutely true. It's funny because you're talking about it now, it's I see all these seeds being planted back when from my childhood and education and first jobs.

When I started the business, it was not by intention. I knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur and there were some other projects I was involved with at the time. Everybody was building an app.

BEN Right. The thing to do.

RYAN And so obviously, I was building an app as well. Yeah. I was searching for that entrepreneur lifestyle or mission. So when I started the business, basically, we adopted a dog from Austin Pets Alive. That was the origination of the story.

BEN You had moved. After all your consulting and stuff like that, you moved from California to Austin? Right?

RYAN Yeah. Yeah.

BEN That's before you started [Bones & Co.](#)?

RYAN Yeah. There's definitely a gap in time between those two. I mean that spent ... I worked for Kiva, [which is a microfinance organization](#). I lived in Liberia and Sierra Leone and we did microfinance for developing countries. That was a really impactful experience. Had some fun in between. Did a

motorcycle trip with a friend from south Africa all the way to Tanzania. Did a van trip, the obligatory van trip, for a year.

BEN Where all did you go in your van?

RYAN We actually went from Alaska all the way down to Mexico. Yeah, it was fantastic. We went to Dead Horse up at the border there.

BEN Right.

RYAN And had the famous toe. I don't know if you've heard about this, but they do a toe shot, basically. They have some of the old miners toes in this bar and you take this shot with the old miner's toe there.

BEN It's a different culture up there.

RYAN It is. It is. Now they've instituted a fine if you eat the toe, because I guess somebody ate the toe in one of the shots with us.

BEN What did they Heimlich it up? How'd they get it back.

RYAN I don't know. I think it was gone. They had to-

BEN They had to find another miner's toe?

RYAN There was a several year gap where they were in search of another toe.

BEN Wow. I feel bad to the person who had to volunteer [crosstalk 00:13:55] to replace it. Yeah.

RYAN So yeah, we went all the way to Alaska and then, obviously, the Oregon Coast, the California Coast, it was stunning. And then down in Mexico, lived in a small community down there called La Ventana. A lot of kite boarding, wind surfing, yeah, it was great. It was a great experience. Being on the road and living that full life, I realized there was something missing in that.

BEN Yeah. Because on some level, that's what people ... They work, thinking they're going to get to that point, right? You almost inverted your career and life in that way and said, "I'm not going to wait until I'm retired and I get an RV. I'm just going to do this when I'm younger," and that sort of thing.

RYAN Yeah. No, absolutely. It was interesting as I think I had some, my experiences being younger, really highlighted for me that some of these expectations that we put on ourselves of what the future should look like, people will reach those and you keep searching. It doesn't bring the fulfillment I think people expect.

BEN Right.

RYAN From a young age, I saw on the van trip, I had an amazing time. Probably one of the best times of my life, but you can only do it for so long. You know?

BEN Yeah.

RYAN After 200 sunsets, there's more to life than just drinking a margarita on the beach. Although it sounds great, there's definitely, I think for humans especially, that there's this desire to create meaning, purpose into your life. That is really valuable to have that. I think moderation for everything. Having enjoying the sunsets, but also striving to build something meaningful and having an impact upon your community and yourself.

BEN Absolutely.

RYAN Yeah. That brought me. That was a long winded answer back to-

BEN No. That's great. So then you decided to move to Austin?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN How did you pick Austin?

RYAN Yeah. I had a friend probably six years previous, we would go out to the bar. He would tell me these stories about this great city called Austin he grew up in. It sounded too good to be true. Right?

BEN Mm-hmm (affirmative).

RYAN It was like, reasonable cost of living, great food.

BEN This was a long time ago, by the way.

RYAN Yeah. It's changed very quickly.

BEN No longer is reasonable.

RYAN Yeah. Artists, great art community, business community, good people, outdoor city. It was I think a lot of people reminisce about their hometowns and I always took it as that.

I was coming to Austin to visit and I was just blown away. It was like literally everything he laid out, it was like, "Man, this is-

BEN That's right. He wasn't embellishing the story.

RYAN No. It was so good. I was like, "This has got to be the next spot." So happy I did because it's such a great community of business owners, of artists, of that creative community that has flourished, that has gotten more expensive. But one of the reasons I was able to start my business was the cost of living.

BEN Right.

RYAN When I came to Austin, it was jobless. I knew I wanted to do something entrepreneurial. I started, the [Capital Factory's](#) a tech startup.

BEN Right.

RYAN Incubator, here in Austin. Yeah, I was working out of the [Capital Factory](#) working on app developments and trying to find, carve a space out for that. Along the way, we adopted a dog from [Austin Pets Alive](#).

BEN Right.

RYAN Rigsby, he was a ... Sad story. The litter of puppies got abandoned behind a dumpster downtown. Somebody found them and brought them to the shelter several days later. They were in bad, bad shape. I mean they're all removed from their mother, so they didn't have that nutrition or an upbringing in a home. They were just on the street. So when they brought them in, they're in bad cases, malnourished, underweight. The whole list of things you can imagine when dogs get abandoned. We adopted Rigsby. We really felt like-

BEN I assume that's a reference to the Beatles, the song?

RYAN No. No. My girlfriend's obsessed with Tim Riggins. That was her two men in her life is me and Tim Riggins.

BEN Awesome.

RYAN The next best thing is Rigsby.

BEN That's good.

RYAN Running a side story, she's going to kill me for saying this, but we were-

BEN Those are the best stories.

RYAN Yeah. We were at our local park taking the dog for a walk, and we met this other dog owner and dog and they were playing and we were chatting it up. She turned out to be Tim Riggins ... What's ... I can't remember the ... There's a character from Friday Night Lights, the actors name.

BEN Right.

RYAN He lives in Austin.

BEN Right, yes.

RYAN It turned out that this woman we were talking to was his girlfriend. I had the foresight to mention to her, "Oh, that's so funny. My girlfriend has the biggest crush on your boyfriend. Has actually named our dog after your boyfriend." Super ...yeah. That was a lonely night that night.

BEN That's awesome. Small town. Small town problems.

RYAN Yeah. Alex was not happy that admission at the dog park. Rigsby got adopted. We always-

BEN What year is this?

RYAN This was six years ago. Yeah. Actually, I take that back. Seven. He just had his birthday. His birthday was yesterday. He's seven years old.

BEN Happy Birthday, Rigsby.

RYAN Yeah, Happy Birthday. He had a great birthday.

BEN If you're listening out there, Rigsby, Happy Birthday.

RYAN Yeah, he had a birthday. You're talking about parenting, pet parenting. It was like we had a full, full day planned for Rigsby on his birthday with-

BEN All the friends came over.

RYAN See your friends, toy delivers, dinners, his favorite things, the frisbee, dog walk three times at the park, play dates. Yeah so it was a busy birthday celebration for Rigs.

BEN That's awesome.

RYAN But yeah, when Rigsby got home from when we adopted him, he was obviously in much worse shape than he is today.

BEN That's right. That's right.

RYAN My girlfriend and I were trying to find a good food for him.

BEN You had to nourish him back to health.

RYAN Yeah, and bring him back to health. We didn't have any luck. She turned to me and said, "Hey, well you're the one with this pet background. Like why don't you have it figured out? What's going on?"

BEN Come on Mr. FFA. Do your thing.

RYAN Yes. Exactly. I was looking at what we were feeding him and I just ... It resonated to me. I was eating Paleo at the time. I had done some Keto cycles as well. I was in tune with my own nutrition. For my dog and what we were feeding him, I was like, "There's such a disconnect here." I had heard about this raw feeding movement for pets. That was the idea of feeding a dog, biologically what they needed out in the wild, not just processed cardboard that we're feeding our pets now. We started experimenting with that.

The problem was all of these diets were low fat. For me at that time, I had great success with my own nutrition with a higher fat diet. Because I grew up in the mentality of low-fat everything, in childhood.

BEN Right. That was that era. Yeah.

RYAN That was the thing. It was funny because we were still fat.

BEN That's right.

RYAN We had low-fat cookies, low-fat ice cream. It was like-

BEN I refer to it as the Snackwell's era.

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. It was in everything we ate. That mentality got brought over to pet food.

BEN Right.

RYAN Which is ironic because dogs have always eaten fresh meat. Right?

BEN They do, yeah.

RYAN Out in the wild they didn't eat carbohydrate or processed food.

BEN That's right.

RYAN We were at our wits end. We had gone to vet some pet stores, and I had obviously done a ton of research. We started feeding him a higher fat raw diet we were crafting ourselves. It was amazing. You just have one of those epiphany moments like, "This is working." It was incredible to see. He's putting on weight, digesting his food properly. He was growing. It was almost like this big relief, really, personally, because there was a lot of pressure. When you're a parent, caring for especially for an animal or human that can't take care of themselves, I think responsibility as humans, we feel that we extend to that.

BEN Right.

RYAN Yeah, we were super stoked about it. People had been following our journey obviously, our friend group and stuff.

BEN Right.

RYAN And were amazed to see what Rigsby blossomed into with good nutrition. They started asking for some food. At the time, raw feeding it is more expensive than grocery store kibble. We were like, "Well, how are we going to pay for this?" People were asking about, and I was like, "Oh, wow. This is great. We'll just make some batches for our friends. And they can cover the food costs and we get to feed Rigsby for free."

BEN Right.

RYAN That was the genesis of the business.

BEN Sort of like buying a duplex and leasing out one side of it.

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. Totally. At the time, I was still trying to start a career in the tech scene in Austin.

BEN Right.

RYAN I think-

BEN What was your app? Or what was the general domain you focused on?

RYAN Okay. There is still a soft spot.

BEN Still working on it. Still going to happen. Okay.

RYAN Actually I'm hoping somebody will do this. The idea was a wine app, where there's lots of wine apps, obviously, today.

BEN Right.

RYAN Of you mark the wine that you enjoy, and you have rankings, and you can explore new ones, recommendations.

BEN Right.

RYAN But for me the gap was I go into a wine store and I'd be like-

BEN It's pretty overwhelming.

RYAN Super overwhelming. It's all brands you've never heard of before. Right?

BEN No. Yeah.

RYAN Every retail store had a different location or every restaurant has a different wine set up, and you always-

BEN I feel like a moron all the time. It's just like, "I don't know." But yeah, I'm just guessing.

RYAN There's just, I mean, thousands and thousands of labels. The idea was that we could go and get a recommendation based on the place you're at for the wine you were serving. The problem is, when I was getting into this, the first customer, any business in Austin, the first customer that comes to mind is Whole Foods.

BEN Right.

RYAN So we went to Whole Foods to talk about integrating the app into the business and see what the opportunities were there. The problem is they don't have a great system, or at the time didn't have a great system of their inventory of what they even have on their shelves currently.

BEN Right. That's right. Yeah.

RYAN That was-

BEN Yeah, that's one of the comical things about the Amazon acquisition too because Whole Foods wasn't known for having the most robust inventory systems.

RYAN Right.

BEN Right, yeah.

RYAN That was the app that never made it. Out of every failure is born a new opportunity.

BEN They always teach you something. Absolutely. You gain perspective personally, professionally, you have to grapple with it, solve problems. It's still really useful.

RYAN Yeah. When I realized the app was not going anywhere, it was tough. I was frustrated with what the next thing was going to be. This whole time, I had just such an amazing experience with this high fat, raw food that we fed Rigsby.

BEN Right.

RYAN At that time, I was still looking for ... I was talking with other co-founders and going to other tech meet ups and it was fascinating to see, at some point, more and more people were asking for the food. I was like, "Well, ..."

BEN "But I was here to talk about the app and you keep steering me towards talking about this raw dog food."

RYAN Yeah. It was like, "What more of a sign do you need to start a business." So yeah, that's how we started going. I actually had the van that I took on my road trip in Austin. We would go and lease kitchen space from midnight to 4:00 AM or 5:00 AM, because it was the cheapest time to rent kitchen space.

BEN Absolutely, yeah.

RYAN They weren't using it that late at night, so I would go in and prep the food. And then we would put it in the cooler. When I say, "We," that's the royal we, that's the me. I would put it in a cooler and I would drive around and deliver to friends and the friends of friends. That was the start. So we started from very, very meager means.

BEN You really are ... You're an overnight butcher and then delivery person.

RYAN Yeah.

BEN You're delivering fresh, refrigerated at the time, raw ... What were you making at that point? Was it all beef? Was it chicken?

RYAN Yeah. We'd primarily do beef, chicken and turkey. We were actually doing what we'd call like a whole prey model, so it was literally like parts of the animal. Yeah, I literally had a butcher cleaver and we would portion the meals specifically for the dog. We'd add our veggie mix to it and wrap it up. I remember we had the crappiest containers. I don't know if you ever remember the boats you'd get at a football game or something at high school-

BEN Yeah, sure. Yeah, super. The nachos would just start to collapse on the way back to the bleachers.

RYAN Yeah. We portioned the meals in that and then wrap it with saran wrap.

BEN Okay, yeah. Very classy.

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. I remember it was a big day in the business-

BEN The dogs just often, I assume, accidentally eat the container.

RYAN Right. Well I imagine, that we got any customers at the time was really amazing. But this shady dude in an '89 van with-

BEN With a bloody cleaver.

RYAN Yeah. Pull up and then unload these nacho boxes wrapped with the Saran Wrap, to their home. Yeah, it was amazing that we survived those days. But I think it really spoke to the quality of the food, and that people were ... Most of our customers at the time were the same experience that we had experienced, was that you're at your wits end looking for something that would help your pet. And so at that point, I think they were willing to try anything because they had tried everything before.

BEN Was it all word of mouth at that point?

RYAN Oh, yeah.

BEN It was just people, initially your friends, and then your friends would tell people, and those people would tell people?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN And then you're just driving around the city with the dog food wagon.

RYAN That's it.

BEN That's awesome. How did you go from that to getting into your first retail store? Did you have a brand name at that point? Did you have a website?

RYAN Yeah. We eventually went to farmer's market. We started doing the farmers' markets and then we put up a website. To me, when I look back, the farmer's market was such an amazing experience.

BEN It's so valuable.

RYAN It's such a pure connection of commerce. It's like you'd have your stand, and then the consumer would be walking down the aisle. It was like this-

BEN And usually they, a lot of times they brought cash. They'd only have so much cash. And so, are they going to spend their \$20.00 with you or with the stand next door or whatever the thing is. Yeah.

RYAN It was like you'd have to attract. How do you figure out someone just coming in up to your booth? Right?

BEN Yeah.

RYAN So you've got to have good signage or an interesting thing. We would always do treats. Say, "Oh, would your dog like a treat?" You get them in the booth and then you have to give them the pitch and educate. And then you could hear the objections or-

BEN Right.

RYAN ... the curiosity, or what they were going through on their issues, or what they were looking in a food. It was that connection. It was so amazing to me. When you got somebody, when you were able to close a sale, that they would go back and they'd come back the next week, and you could start building that relationship with the customer over time. It was, to hear the other stories, I think that was such an unbelievable motivator at an early stage is to hear people's stories about where their dog was and then what their dog transformed into with proper nutrition. That was, because there's so many hard spots along the journey of the business, but having those drive that passion forward was a critical thing for us. It was knowing that our customers, we've changed our customers' dogs lives in a profound way.

BEN Yeah. You get that immediate real-time feedback. It's so powerful.

RYAN Yeah. You can iterate so quickly. Every week was a new iteration. It's like, "Hey, what are we doing for pricing? What are we going to do for format?" Eventually we discovered not all people like to feed whole prey diets of chopped up parts. Right?

BEN Yeah. Yeah. For their little pug or whatever the thing. Yeah.

RYAN Yeah. They wanted a ground product that was easier to portion and feed. The product evolved after that. But I think the lesson of how we got to every stage of the business, every evolution that we grew, was really driven by taking market share from the next player up. I think that was an important lesson I learned, was we got into our first retail store because we were starting creative market and had a customer base.

BEN That's right.

RYAN We were taking away business from the retailer.

BEN Right.

RYAN We got ... I'd been knocking-

BEN So people who had gone to, let's say, an independent pet store were now going, were getting their pet food at the farmer's market. Then naturally it creates an impulse in the pet store to say, "Hey, how do I get that here? I need to keep that customer."

RYAN Exactly. The retail environment in Austin is awesome because there are a lot of independently owned, family owned businesses, and so super supportive.

BEN Right.

RYAN We also lucked out with having that support in the retail environment. But the motivator was we were bringing value to both of each other. Every step along the way as we grew, it was, "Oh, what's this company doing? Like I'm hearing they're growing and taking business away from

whether it be a distributor or a retailer." That's how those conversations always start. So having that demand was such a driving factor to our growth, how we did that.

BEN Absolutely. It makes every subsequent conversation easier too because you say, you had money for it and so, therefore, you can now take that logical leap if you're the buyer for that retail chain to say, "Yeah, okay. This feels like a pretty safe bet."

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. No. Absolutely it was. It was also ironic because every break that we had, it was always like, "Oh, if we could just get into this retail store."

BEN "Then it'll be easy."

RYAN "Everything will be made." The next step from that was a distributor. Like, "Oh, my gosh." I knocked on doors.

BEN "I won't have to drive these anymore."

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. Everything was such a transformative step in my mind at the time. But what I realized is, they're all steps along a much, much longer path.

BEN True. Yeah.

RYAN As an entrepreneur, we're probably only looking one or two steps ahead of that journey. I always thought it was going to be made, and it was looking back, it was made. I was-

BEN In some respects, sure.

RYAN Yeah. I didn't have to from midnight to 5:00. We had enough revenue that we could rent a space and not do the midnight to 5:00 thing.

BEN Right.

RYAN And then, we didn't have to go to people's houses. We'd go to a farmers' market and a retail store. And then it was, oh, we didn't have to drive every week to do the deliveries. Somebody else was going to do that.

BEN Right.

RYAN That was the evolution. We're a bootstrap business. I started the business with basically nothing. I think in all, probably the first year and a half, two years, we put in \$10,000 into the business and it's been organically growing since. The idea that you need a lot of capital to enter the consumer packaged goods space, it's not-

BEN Yeah, if you do it in a smart way like that, where you scale up in these tiny little increments and get that iterative feedback and ... Again, to your earlier point, if you hadn't gone through that app development phase you might not have understood some of those things, too. Right? In the app development world there's the minimal viable product. There's that agile iterative development cycles and all those things that then you're porting over to your pet food company. Right?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN And applying it in a very different context.

RYAN Yeah. I'd also seen in my consultancy work before, and the tech scene is very ... The venture capital scene is at, it's peak during those times. And seeing that, there's I think sometimes a little bit of an illusion that you need to have a massive amount of funding to be successful.

BEN Right.

RYAN And so the community I was in, especially on the tech scene, was all about cap tables and fundraising and you're working on your series A, and-

BEN It becomes an end in itself for people. It's not. I think sometimes it's one of the major events that gets covered in the press and it's always struck me as a little funny or silly. It would be like if there was a front page story somewhere on like, "Ryan got a loan from the bank." You're like, "Yeah, so he can now go back to work and do the business."

RYAN Not sexy.

BEN It's not that sexy. Right? It's like, "You raised my ... Okay. You convinced some people who had money or they knew some other people who had a lot of money to give you money. And now you did it, good job. High five. Now you actually have to go to work." Okay, that's fine.

RYAN I mean doing the bootstrap route isn't as sexy as the VC.

BEN No.

RYAN In the tech world, you'd go to happy hours and pitch competitions. There's a buzz around that stuff. But through my experience, and there's a great bootstrap community here in Austin, this really supportive community that is like there are many, many successful businesses that are fully founder funded.

BEN Right.

RYAN They don't need the capital. In the CPG space it is, I think it is difficult. It's looking at what your end goals on entrepreneurship.

BEN Right.

RYAN For us, we're very, very mission focused company and I think it's a strength of ours now to be family owned and not have outside capital because we can relentlessly focus on our mission. That's such a critical thing for me as we're building the business is driving that meaning in terms of how we impact our pets' health.

For [Bones & Co.](#) right now, it's a devastating problem that we're facing with our pets. One in three dogs are dying of cancer right now. I lost a pet when I was a child. The family dog died of cancer. I always had that painful memory. I was always apprehensive about having another dog because it's such a painful loss. With Rigsby, it really came back to top of mind as ... And as we got into the-

BEN When you saw him teetering on the ... yeah. Like in really poor health.

RYAN Yeah. As we got into it, we realized this is an endemic problem with our dogs.

BEN Right.

RYAN Rigsby was a situation because he was abandoned as a puppy. But as we got into learning more about the customers' experiences, so many dogs are in poor health. They had like, the thing about one in three dogs die of cancer. That if your dog is over 10 years of age, there's a 50% chance. It's like, "Something is wrong here." That is such a driver for everybody at the company in terms of the product and who are customers are and what we're serving, that it drives for the business's motivation.

I think for any business that's growing and you have outside money, there's the friction that's caused between those two is always tough to manage, especially as a founder. It's like how-

BEN Because you have that outside money, you have to grow.

RYAN Yes.

BEN There's that expectation.

RYAN Yes. There's a different formula for success of what expectations are when you take that money.

BEN Right.

RYAN For many, many companies it could be a great thing. If you're really adamant in terms of your mission and your culture, and you can leverage the money to really grow your business and have a bigger impact, that's fantastic. But for many, many businesses that's not necessarily the story that happens.

BEN Right.

RYAN In the pet industry, one of my favorite stories was there was an early founder in the space. He took private equity money and he had this great business. They eventually had some down rounds. They had forced him out of the business. When I met with him, he was so distraught because he was kicked out of the business, which was his baby.

BEN Right.

RYAN They changed the recipes, which was his baby. The mission of the organization has changed and he said, "Beyond all of that, you know, the real kick in the butt was that they own my face and my likeness." Right?

BEN Yeah.

RYAN Of like, "I don't even like own my face anymore. They're like licensing me to promote their brand and it's not even something I promote." There are really tough stories in that environment. Because I mean, when it comes to money I think there's ... As an entrepreneur, way more sophisticated operators that have their fiduciary duty for their money and their clients' money.

And so going in with being eyes wide open in that early as an entrepreneur was something that I've seen so many early stage companies falter with. Because everybody thinks you have to raise the money, and you don't. You can really ... It might have a longer runway.

BEN Right.

RYAN But give yourself the time to learn about the business, learn about the customers, and then be more sophisticated and calculate when you take or need that money.

BEN Right.

RYAN And do it in a way that supports your mission rather than thinking that it's an end all goal of, "We've raised our series A-

BEN No. That's excellent. I want to dig into that just a little bit more. A couple of thoughts, one about the culture here in Austin, the broader entrepreneurial culture. And again, for people who aren't in Austin, Austin is a tech hub. It's not San Francisco or Silicon Valley, but it's a secondary tech hub. There's a lot going on here.

But it's interesting. Historically, on the tech side of things, I would say the city has tended toward more B2B technology companies, which are not the consumer, B2C consumer facing companies. And so, therefore, aren't often as well known, but are typically stronger revenue models. Right?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN Because you're selling to the businesses. A lot of well known B2C technology companies sell. You think of your Ubers and Lyfts of the world or whatever. They're selling often at a loss because they're trying to gain consumer market share and then they're going to monetize that in some meaningful way later.

So there is a culture here in Austin, even on the technology side, where that bootstrap thing, it's not necessarily a default option to say that you have to go down the investment and venture capital path. It's certainly an option and there's plenty of people who do that, but it's not the only way.

Secondarily, there's also this thing, I think in the CPG space where, again, if you've got your economics right of your business, you should be making if it's dog food, you should buy the ... Let's say you're buying the product for X and you're selling it for Y. Y should be greater than X. Right? [crosstalk 00:42:44].

RYAN It's interesting. It's just an equation.

BEN Yeah, it's a really interesting concept, that sort of thing. If you do that right and your cashflow cycles make sense, then you actually have more money at the end of the month than you started with. Again, this is like, "Whoa. This is not rocket science." But it's surprising how elusive this is in certain startup circles too.

The point of that is, if you structure your business right, then you have the option or the opportunity to scale the business without taking outside capital. The capital, your business is being funded by customers. Those customers do not demand equity from you in your company.

They just want to solve their problem, and so you're helping them. They give you money and you use that money to continue to grow your business.

Typically, in CPG, should you want to raise money, and again this is one of the key differences between consumer packaged goods and a lot of tech, is that it's very, very rare that people invest in CPG in ideas. Right? Or just intellectual property. They're investing more often than not in traction and actual demonstrable data that you are actually selling the product. So if you can't, it ends up being a chicken or egg problem. But if you can't ever make your thing, even at the small level in an overnight commercial kitchen, and sell it to friends and family or get it in one store, whatever the thing is, then it's ... I'm not saying it's impossible, but it's highly improbable that you will ever raise any meaningful money.

So ultimately, to be successful and even to have the opportunity to raise venture capital or private equity, you still have to do it without the venture capital or private equity. That's actually a good thing.

RYAN Yeah. I think you're right. I mean so many people hope scale solves their profitability issues, and very rarely is that the case.

BEN Yeah. If you're losing money on every product, selling more of that product isn't going to solve your problem.

RYAN Yeah. I think looking at the landscape of companies in the CPG world, I think it breaks out into a couple of different tranches. As one is, people have great, amazing product that has good velocity. Talks to their customers, solves a specific problem.

BEN It's met consumer demand in some meaningful way.

RYAN Yeah. The second is cash. I'm sure in the cold brew coffee space, I don't know a lot about, but there's a lot of companies in that space. Cash is going to be a really important factor because at some point the differentiation between the products is quite low.

BEN Right. [crosstalk 00:45:29]. Whoever spends more on marketing.

RYAN Yeah. Your go to market strategy is key with that, and funding in terms of marketing and advertising.

BEN Right.

RYAN And then I think there's another tranche, which is execution. Sometimes I think people say, "Oh, we have to have a brand new or novel product," and that's tough without raising a lot of money. But you could just have a good solid business if you're executing every day in a really high level.

BEN You're really consistent.

RYAN Yeah. Because it's hard, I mean that's one of the hardest things. Always in the small business community here in Austin, people are in that VC world of, "I've got an idea, but I can't share it with you because it's so cool and it's so proprietary. It's such a novel new product."

BEN Yeah. Any experienced, savvy person goes, "I don't care about your idea. I don't care."

RYAN Yeah. It's all about the execution. And it's like-

BEN Yeah. Absolutely. And it feels like it's so true. It feels like one of those empty truisms. But no, really, you could tell me everything and I'm not going to do it because I've got other things going on. And you could tell me how exciting your idea is and I'll ask, "But what have you done?" And if you've done nothing, that tells me everything that I need to know.

RYAN Yeah. I think, yeah, the empty truism is really connected with me in that you hear these things like, "Oh, I want good product market fit." Or, "it's all about the execution." When I started, I had this air of, "Oh, yeah. I'd be great at executing," or, "My product is differentiated."

For us, we always had started out with a high fat diet. That was our secret sauce. But we weren't talking about it. Because it's a new concept and it wasn't really resonating with customers when we were talking about high fat, low carbohydrate diets.

BEN This is before Keto took off, right?

RYAN Yeah. We were talking about the raw food and where we're sourcing it from and all these different attributes. We thought we were doing it better than everybody else. But the differentiation wasn't there and so we weren't getting a lot of traction. Especially when we got at retail, because we weren't off the shelf like having a compelling story. But I always thought we did because it was my baby. You know?

BEN Right. Right.

RYAN It was like, "This is my story." It is better than everybody else's, but it's like how do you communicate that to the customer?

And so for us, it wasn't until we started talking and taking that risk to talking about why the formula ... Because people say, "Oh, okay. The product works great." But that's after they get it into the home and start feeding it.

BEN That's right. You need to get them to try it.

RYAN But we were so scared of talking about the differentiator because it was unique and somewhat a new concept that people were concerned with. And so being able to do that in a more deliberate way, to drive that differentiation, it took a lot trust in the product and in the marketing of it. To loop that back around, we all think our product's differentiated. But you really need to have, be very clear on your product differentiation in the market.

BEN It's so hard to do that because it's kind of like your baby's the cutest baby, or whatever. Your puppy's the cutest puppy. But they can't all be the cutest. They just can't. It's really hard.

BEN You need the people in your life, you need some trusted, good friends in your life who will be candid with you and say, "I love you so much that I'm actually going to tell you the truth." Because I encounter this all the time with founders, you love it. You built it. It is your baby. If you make your thing and you hand it to somebody and you have that expectant look in your eye and you're like, "It's the best. Isn't it?" And you're like, you can't say, "No." You can't say, "Oh, this makes me want to throw up or whatever. It ... Yeah." How do you get that real feedback that forces you out of your comfort zone that actually creates the differentiation? Because the truth

is, they don't care about you and your product, they care about their problem and their needs and they want that solved.

RYAN I would take it even a step further, is like do not trust your family and close friends if you have product market fit. They love you too much, to-

BEN That's right. Your mom's not going to be brutal with you. Maybe some of your mom's friends would be.

RYAN What works is when you are at the store, and secret shop. I love going into pet stores and watch consumers' experience of they go to the freezer aisle, in our case, and talk to them about their experience. Which bag do they pull? Why do they pull it? Do you know about the brands? What is the differentiator? I mean even for our customers, why did you choose that? And if they can communicate to you the differentiation, then you know you have traction.

BEN That's right. That you're messaging began to work. That you had some clarity there. Yeah. That's really great.

The business progresses. And again, you've made some very deliberate thoughtful choices. I feel like, again, to bring the story full circle, you've not chased after the golden ring of rapidly scaling at any cost. Right?

You recognized, "We're mission based. We're principled. We want to grow and be," maybe not tiny, but, "modest growth, sustainable modest growth and really carve out our niche in the world. That's what we're going for, and we can make a really great company that we're proud of, great products, help a lot of people and take care of ourselves, and those around us." That's a really admirable thing. I'm sure you get a lot of pressure to say, "Yeah, but could you grow faster? Could you do this?" Whatever.

How do you navigate as you think about what the future is for you and for your company? How do you navigate maybe the temptation to speed things up and to try to ... The urgency and like, "Oh, we've got to go, go, go and create these new goals," and that sort of thing. And again, there's nothing wrong with having ... Obviously, I think goals are a really good thing. But how do you not chase after this mirage of growth at any cost?

RYAN Yeah. It's great. It's hard. It's very hard to. When you see, in our space, lots of companies that enter the space and they are flashy and they have big backing and they're spending a lot of money. Every time you open your Facebook, or Instagram, you see their ad in front of you.

BEN Right.

RYAN It's all lollipops and candy canes in their business. It's hard, because like, "Man, that could've been us." That's the question like, "It could've been us. We could've grown faster."

But I think for me is it's really a personal philosophy. I study and practice Buddhism. I think it's from the earlier time of my life and with the teaching that I learn and practice today is that we're constantly chasing, as humans. It's built into our DNA. And to rest in the spot of where we are now and taking comfort in that is the path forward to remove suffering.

BEN Right. And it's so difficult.

RYAN It's so difficult. It's a practice every day. I mean it's in our nature to chase. But those things are fleeting. I think that's been the underlying guiding principle for me is realizing that I'm meant to be where I am right now today, and accepting and thriving in that space. And realizing that chasing fleeting things doesn't bring ... Maybe it brings short term happiness, but not long-term fulfillment.

I think it is challenging. It's always that practice of being present in the moment and meeting ... That's everything we do I think is like meeting our customers where they're at in their journey. It's a journey to get to our food of a high nutrition food and meeting them at their stop, buying their dog food at a grocery store, understanding that. We can educate them, meet them where they're at, and then they're going to be on their own path and their own journey. And for us, we're on our own path and our own journey and not having that comparing mind of looking at somebody else's journey and wishing for it, because sometimes, it's not as glamorous as it's made up to seem.

BEN No. No.

RYAN We're starting to be in ... Right now, I think is a critical period of the markets are starting to realize this question about profitability. They're paying a dear, dear price for that. And so, I think they're looping that accelerated growth that looks really sexy and appealing to folks, rather than that continued long-term sustainable model I think is going to be back in vogue at some point.

BEN Oh, absolutely. Well social media obviously feeds into this too right? I saw this New Yorker cartoon pretty recently, and there's these two emaciated guys chained up to a wall in a dungeon and stuff like that. One guy turns to the other and he says, "According to your social feed, you're doing much better than I had ..." that sort of thing.

This notion that we, you have this glamorous life of avocado toast and kale smoothies. The truth is you're in a 200 square foot apartment, and that's the only spot you can do. You can only do certain yoga poses because that's all you can fit in there.

You see that. You see the sponsored posts. You see the other things and it's so easy. It's almost like that whole ecosystem is designed to make you discontent. Right?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN And to say, "I should be doing better, more ..." whatever the thing is. It's really hard, to your point. It's a practice. It's a discipline to really say.

And again, it's also I think attention, because the point of it is not stagnation. The point isn't that you're trying to not grow and develop and evolve as an individual and as a business. Yes, you want to do that. You want to seize opportunities that come your way, but you want to do that in a way that feels healthy. Right?

RYAN Yeah. There's a constant balance of ... Just because we're bootstrapped doesn't mean we're not going after it every day. I mean there is a great driving passion in our organization because for us, it's just a different, I think, motivation. Our metric is, "How many dogs are we saving with our food?"

There was actually in the company's evolution we were I think a little bit more laissez faire in our growth trajectory and goals and execution because it was this idea of meeting people where they are and people would come to us with this product. Our mission was education. That was our big focus, was like, "Let's educate people about what is going in their pet's food."

BEN Right.

RYAN It's really scary. When you peel it back, people would be very, very surprised.

BEN It's ugly.

RYAN It's real ugly. That it's legal and what's going on in the larger commercialization of pet food, is it'll blow your mind. We knew that this, that transformation of people realizing what is happening and what they're being sold is going to be a longer process.

But somebody asked us about like, "Well, if your mission's just to educate, like does that do anybody any good? Like does that do the dogs any good? Shouldn't the mission be to change the way people are feeding?" And so that really helped us pivot into a more metric driven organization of, "We need to be impacting as many dogs' lives as possible." That's the metric. That filters all the way through, down to our organization. So yeah, I think there is a balance. We have to be profitable. We have to be growing quickly to serve our larger mission.

BEN That's right.

RYAN They're not separate.

BEN That's super aligned too. I think that's a great way of framing it too. Because if you're doing that right, then yeah, you are, you're making revenue. That's an important part of it. If you have no revenue, the business no longer perpetuates itself.

RYAN You're doing a disservice to your customers if you're not profitable and sustainable.

BEN Sure. That's right.

RYAN Absolutely.

BEN You have to get there. And again, if your goal is to impact a number of dogs, well, the reason we're involved in social media is because we're raising awareness among the broader community about this stuff with the goal of helping more dogs.

RYAN Yeah. No. Absolutely. I think that it's striving for growth, it's a balance. But beyond that, is realizing not everything is ... The appearance people put out might not be the authentic experience. And so realizing that we have a shared experience as entrepreneurs or as businesses as connecting on that deeper level, and I think the community here's been such an impactful part of that for me and in my journey is having that network of folks going through the same challenges. Because running a business, by far, is the hardest thing I ever could imagine being done in my life.

As a kid, I was always a high achiever. I remember my freshman or sophomore year at high school, I was distraught about I wasn't being challenged or fully engaged with my education and it was so stressful to me.

BEN Right.

RYAN Like, "Oh, I won't ever going to feel challenged and pushed."

BEN That's right.

RYAN Every morning I wake up and it's like I could not be asked to be pushed harder, in a better way for me to develop both personally and as a business leader and as a product and as a company and as a friend, as a team member with my teammates. It's been a challenging experience.

BEN It's the ultimate in integrated project based learning.

RYAN Really.

BEN Just like because you have to bring your whole self to the thing. There is no structure. There is if you're the founder/CEO person, right, nobody's telling you, you have to do anything. Right? You could stay in bed, I suppose.

RYAN Yeah.

BEN Eventually things will go under, but you ... It requires this motivation that there has to be an inner fire, inner drive that gets you up and pointed in a direction and it's you don't always feel it every day. You know?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN Some days, you get bad news. Some days, you have major setbacks. You can feel very alone in that as well.

RYAN Oh yeah. The challenges of running a business in terms of isolation or depression or anxiety are super real. And for me and where I'm at in the business today, is really a challenge of internal growth and working through those. Any entrepreneur is going to have those experiences.

BEN Right.

RYAN Because of the challenges that were ... The whole idea of entrepreneurship is bringing, creating something from nothing is a difficult, difficult path. The setbacks and wins are so high and so low because I think one of the challenges that we have as entrepreneurs is projection of the business onto the self and creating our identity from the success of the business.

BEN Right.

RYAN It is so difficult to separate those two things during your experience. There is not a lot of support in those ways because in the community, the business building community, everybody talks about all the wins.

BEN The successes.

RYAN How great. How much money they raised. How quickly the products doing. They got picked up by Kroger. All of those things. When in fact, I strive in the communities that I'm a part of to really connect with people on those deeper issues that don't have the maybe exposure that the older ones do. So having that group to know that you're not alone in the struggles that you face as a business owner is that it's a struggle on the path that every business owner faces.

BEN Right.

RYAN And that we can connect on that and support each other in that way, has been so crucial. For me to evolve as a person to deal with those with grace and compassion to myself to understand that, "Yeah, some days are going to be really shitty and really dark, and that, that's okay and that's part of the journey." And to know that some days the numbers are going to be up and some days are going to be down. That doesn't reflect on-

BEN You're not a better or worse person as a result of that.

RYAN Right. Yeah. But as the self, those truisms that you talked about earlier, much easier to say that.

BEN Absolutely.

RYAN When you wake up in the morning and deal with those shitty sales numbers and have to realize that you're the same person you are when you put on your pants yesterday, takes a lot of practice.

BEN That's right.

RYAN As for me, the next evolution of the business is really one about self-discovery and exploration and growth. Because at some point, the founder is limiting the business in its growth. I see that in myself now. Whether it be interpersonal relationships within the business, being a better person, being less reactive, having grace and compassion for ... In connecting with other people as they grow in their journey and putting yourself in a seat where you're best serving the business because I think entrepreneurs are a very unique personality set.

BEN That's right. Yeah.

RYAN We're very challenged. Sometimes I think we're completely unemployable in many ways.

BEN Yeah. Many of us are practicing juvenile delinquents. You know?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN In some ways, you're like, "This sucks. I could do it better." Right? Yeah.

RYAN Great skill set when you're starting, but as the business matures-

BEN It can be a liability. Yeah.

RYAN Yeah. And if the entrepreneur's not willing to grow with the business, both emotionally, mentally, and in terms of execution base of learning skills and teachings to take it to that next growth level, it can be a real detriment to the business. And so for me, that's how do I structure my day? How do I have good health practices to manage my stress and anxiety of taking care of diet and exercise and having a social life outside of just running the business are struggles.

BEN Right.

RYAN But to do that is to give fuel to the business. And the knowing how to let go of control because I started, I feel very fortunate I started the business and knew every aspect of the business from front to back.

BEN Right.

RYAN And being able to bring team members in who are better at some functions, are specialized in more functions than I can is really where the business took off the last three years. It was a really difficult time the first three years, I would say, when I was doing everything, every day by myself. It was tough.

It wasn't until we started bringing on team ... And again, the royal we.

BEN That's right.

RYAN We had team members coming in and had specialization and better execution in many tasks than I did, so that then the business was able to grow.

BEN And people with unique talents, right?

RYAN Yeah.

BEN That you don't have as a founder. You can't be good at everything.

RYAN No.

BEN You can try to be not terrible at everything, but hopefully if you can find the right people, surround yourself with those people. You're like, "Oh thank you. You're so much better at this than I am."

RYAN Yeah. It's tough having to letting that get because it is your baby and you have done it and you've been proficient at it enough. But to take the business to the next level, have better execution, you have to have ... I like to think of the right people in the right seats. And as many times, entrepreneurs were in a lot of wrong seats.

BEN Oh, yeah.

RYAN Getting out of that seat can be really tough.

BEN You can see that in a lot of different ways. I see that with entrepreneurs who end up bogged down in one part of their business that they're actually not very good at. If they could find the right team member or partner or whatever else to take that off their plate, then they could be

unlocked to do some of these other higher value tasks or honestly, just things they're better at. It can be painful to watch people flail in that sort of thing. I've certainly done it as well.

I want to pause here a second because we are ... You brought up some really great and important stuff. I think it's really critical that we don't give it short shift. That is this broader issue of mental health in the context of entrepreneurship. Right? We live in some pretty crazy times. We've got there's constant drama in our culture. Again, from politics to technology to social issues and global unrest, there's always something going down and we're inundated with messages. So we have a baseline of noise all around us.

Then, you're in a situation where you are attempting something that is very difficult in starting a business as you described it, making something out of nothing. Right? That is not a simple or easy or negligible task. In many cases you're doing it either alone or with a very small group of people. And because we're human, we have our off days and we have relational issues. We have our own identity crises and crippling self-doubt and all of this stuff. It can feel so isolating. I've certainly experienced it. I know you've experienced as you've shared. I think it's so powerful to at least just take a moment and acknowledge the reality.

That whatever you see in the news or the business press about people who at least by all outward appearances have it all made, the reality is nobody has it all made. We all have issues. We all, again, the wealthiest or most glamorous or famous person has all kinds of stuff going on behind the scene, in their mind, in their heart, wherever. Just to acknowledge that we are all fundamentally human.

We happen to have this entrepreneurial calling, but we are, we're giving it our best shot. And even if you've been successful, even if you built a business and you made a lot of money or you're well known or well regarded, this year or next year or the year after that, you're entering into a new world. Success is never guaranteed for anyone in the same way that life is never guaranteed for anyone. Right? So we're all giving it our best shot and a lot of times, we're going to mess up.

And for me, in my life, I've failed a ton and I've succeeded much less often. I know for certain that I've learned so much more through my failures because I'm self-reflexive about those failures too. Right? When I think there's human nature is when we're successful, we just assume we're successful because we're awesome. It's like, "Well, I made that three point shot or that half-court shot because I'm just awesome." Right?

But then if you miss a lay-up or something like that and you're like, "Man, what's wrong with me. What's ... Are my mechanics wrong? Am I ... Do I have a mental block? Am I scared of something?" It just forces you to interrogate some things that might actually end up in the big picture being much more productive for you in growing as a person, as a leader and all that sort of stuff.

Tell us a little bit more about your ... And again, maybe from your perspective or from other entrepreneurs that you've had the privilege of talking with or coming alongside, how do you advise people when it comes to some of these really critical mental health issues.

RYAN

Yeah. I think first is just talking about it. I mean that is so important, especially in our community. We need to change those conversations to acknowledging that the difficulty of any entrepreneur on their journey and being open to having those conversations in every aspect of the community.

I think being able to recognize and identify that you are having some hard days or hard times. The problem, especially with entrepreneurs, you have a lot of odds stacked against you for your health and well-being. Right?

BEN Yeah.

RYAN You've got travel. You've got stress. You've got long working days. You have limited social life. You're isolated, and many times especially as a solo entrepreneur.

BEN You're not getting enough sleep.

RYAN Yeah. Yeah. For me, one of the darkest days in my experience or business was we had worked for a really long time on a distributor. We talked to him for probably a year and a half. They said, "Okay. We're going to do it."

BEN Finally.

RYAN Finally. I was like, "We're a made. Yes. We're going to have all this access to more retailers and be able to get our product to more states." It was such a big win, we went out and hired additional staff to help support that and just feeling on top of the world.

Then, get a call from a third party that I didn't even know at the time. They had already, they had placed their order. They made their product. It was shipping in a week. Get the call. "Oh, we just acquired so and so. And we're not going to be taking your shipment." I said, "Oh, well like is it delayed, or ..." "No. Ever. Like we're tearing up your contract and not going to be receiving the purchase order."

BEN Wow.

RYAN The world just like ... I mean talk about the floor falling out from beneath you.

BEN Absolutely.

RYAN It was devastating because we're looking at, I made the product that we're sitting on.

BEN That's right.

RYAN So cash issue. I've got hired people to support that. And now, it starts snowballing, because from my personality, I catastrophize things. This is like, "Oh, the whole company is going under."

BEN Yeah, the sky's falling.

RYAN Yeah. It's done. It seems insurmountable. Yeah. The challenge for me in how I experience stress and anxiety is that it builds upon itself and it snowballs. So now I'm thinking, "Oh, worst case scenario is everything's going to shit. Like we're screwed."

BEN It becomes self-fulfilling prophecies because you start to see. You're reading the tea leaves a little bit and you're like, "Oh, see. I knew this was all going to fall apart there too." Yeah.

RYAN Yeah. And on top of that, I'm stressing out. Then first thing, I want to go eat some unhealthy food.

BEN Right. Right.

RYAN Or drink, have a glass of wine to unwind. And then the next day you're like, "Oh, I'm not feeling so good. I'm not going to work out." The day after that, I mean you're stressed, you're not sleeping well. So all these things build upon itself and you get into an emotional funk. And so for me, it's how I deal with that is really having a good routine and no matter what, I'm getting out of bed and I am going to go hit the gym. That's how I start my days and it's a great way to relieve stress and center yourself and your body.

I also do have a meditative practice and that's been a lifesaver for me, and always coming back to your grounded nature and just sitting and being present in your body and calming your mind. It's really, it's a battle with your mind. I like to call it mind trash. It's the crap talk that you're doing to yourself of all the what ifs and how you're a screw up because you couldn't close the deal. You should've shipped it a week earlier. The contract wasn't written enough. All these things. When, you know it's like shit happens.

BEN It does.

RYAN That's the journey of the entrepreneur. And to realize, "Yeah, it is okay to be depressed right now. That is a fucking really shitty thing that's just [crosstalk 01:15:13]."

BEN That's right. Yeah.

RYAN And that I should be disappointed and that is okay.

BEN And if you didn't allow yourself, you didn't give yourself the freedom to be disappointed then you're not actually doing yourself any favors. Right?

RYAN You're not living an authentic life.

BEN Just own it. Own it. It's okay.

RYAN Yeah, I mean there's so much pressure that you built on ... If you're this outgoing happy type and nothing's going to bring you down.

BEN Pollyanna.

RYAN Yeah. I mean it's a lot of pressure to put on yourself. I'm like, "It's okay. We had a setback." But what I found the most critical attribute to get through the stuff as an entrepreneur is great. Is like you get up the next morning and you go hit it again, and there's another distributor out there.

BEN One foot in front of the other. Right? It's not-

RYAN That, the journey is really one of overcoming insurmountable hurdles and to know that's what you started with.

BEN Sometimes comically so. Right? You're just like, "Oh, oh. This is going to make for a great story in my memoir," or whatever.

RYAN Yeah. Oh yeah. Like the naivety of, "Oh, I'm going to change a \$62 billion pet industry out of my 1989 Volkswagen Van."

BEN That's right. That's right.

RYAN As entrepreneurs, we have that strength, but as it grows, I think there's more responsibility. You feel more responsibility. There's just more to lose. Right? You've got this business. You've got people that are working for you.

BEN And their livelihoods and their families are dependent upon your business, and that's a lot to carry on your shoulders.

RYAN Yeah, it absolutely is. For me, the exercise, nutrition, meditation and then community I think is the last one, is having a support group. You cannot do it by yourself. You have to friends, family, other business leaders, your team that you're working with and be vulnerable. I mean that's such a ... I think such a powerful position to be in.

RYAN Another great Texan, was it Brené Brown?

BEN Yeah, yeah from Houston. Yeah.

RYAN She's been doing great work in the power of vulnerability.

BEN Right.

RYAN And how we can live an authentic life in being more vulnerable with who we are and what we're experiencing and where our shortcomings are and acknowledge those. It's a place of strength. It's like having a facade is the easy way out. Let's sit with those emotions and sit with our shortcomings.

BEN Right.

RYAN It's tough, it's really tough to do.

BEN To be comfortable in your own skin too.

RYAN Yeah.

BEN Yeah and again, not to put on airs and to try to play status games with people and all the things that happen. It kind of-

RYAN Well, the system's built against that. The system is like those likes that you get. The award. You get one at the pitch competition. The stores you're in. I mean that's the whole system that we've created as humans, and to know you don't have to play by those rules. You can be authentic to your experience and to yourself and still have great success within your business.

BEN Yeah. That's super refreshing. Your perspective is great. I love it. Tell me a little bit about from your perspective, for those of us who aren't in the pet food industry, what's ... Describe the pet food industry. What is it? Maybe what's surprising about it that we might not understand as casual, just consumers of pet food? Or maybe we're not eating pet food ourselves, but our pets are consuming it.

RYAN Well, we can eat some of our pet food.

BEN We can. Some of it's so good and such high quality stuff that, yes, it is-

RYAN I mean our goat milk makes a mean White Russian. But just ...

BEN Hey, I love it.

RYAN Yeah. I think my experience is in the pet industry and so it is different than, I think, grocery in some aspects. For us, we have a very strong and healthy independent retail channel and that's mom-and-pop stores.

BEN Right.

RYAN For me, that's everything. That's the channel that we're supporting because it's other small business owners that are doing the heavy lifting, talking to consumers. They're built with their community. They're supporting the rest of the organizations like-

BEN Why do you feel like in the pet food ... I feel like the ... Of perhaps most or all industries that the pet food, that kind of local retailer ... Again, a lot of times it might be a regional mini chain or something like that. But those retailers have stuck around and weathered the storm better than their equivalents in a lot of other industries. Why do you think that is?

RYAN I think primarily it's one of education and relationships. Because as we've talked about, the humanization of pet is when you're wanting to provide for your pet, you want to provide the best. Having that credibility in your community as an independent pet retailer is so important. They've spent time wading through all the bullshit other larger multinationals and other channels are putting out. It's crazy that we still have to talk about fresh food is better than kibble for your pet. People are blown away. They're like, "Show me the science behind that." It's like, "Really? Fresh food over processed, like shelf stable?"

BEN Let's just translate this over to humans and let me give you the equivalents there.

RYAN Yeah. And pet does lag. They lag, I don't ... Five, ten years behind human trends.

BEN Right.

RYAN I think, primarily it's that when you go to a store and you're buying something, and for many of us and for what I think about for Rigsby it's like we want to trust somebody who's taken the time to go through the labels and understand who's manufacturing the product, and what ingredients their using and where are they sourcing from, and having that credibility is so critical. And so pet retailers in the U.S. have just done such an amazing job of driving that industry forward because of those relationships and because of their knowledge in the field.

It's something you can't get when you go to ... That's where I think it diverges in terms of CPG small businesses. When you go to a grocery store, generally there's not going to be somebody facilitating through the aisle of pet food. Right?

BEN Right. Right.

RYAN You're going to buy the marketing, the image.

BEN That's right. Or what you've always gotten.

RYAN Yeah. In independent retail, it's a much more curated experience of talking to your pet, and talking to the owner, what are their needs, and then recommending a product based on those needs. So yeah, I think the future is really bright with independent retailers.

There is this movement of online sales. There's several companies are coming to the space of doing the direct food models. I think it's the same kind of challenges you'll find with on the human side, like Blue Apron and-

BEN This is more of the fresh stuff?

RYAN Yeah, so-

BEN Because I know that Chewy and some others have been around for a while.

RYAN Yeah. So Chewy, wag.com are big online retailers. And then I think you have a direct to consumer model that's coming in as well, which is the shipping product directly to consumers.

BEN Right.

RYAN The problem again, with like we circle back up to profitability, and I don't know what their-

BEN It's so expensive.

RYAN The metrics are, but if it's anything like Blue Apron or those other consumers, if-

BEN They're burning a lot of cash.

RYAN A lot of cash. Yeah. And also for our industry too, it's a raw frozen, heavy product. It's one of those things I think we're in a good spot to have some defensibility in the prevalence of online sales because we're difficult to ship. And so we can support those retailers in that product channel.

BEN Right.

RYAN So I think that's we're also seeing a lot of folks moving from ... They're moving up the value chain. Right? There's this premiumization of pet food. What's interesting is we're not selling. We look at the numbers every year the market share is going up and up, but we're not selling more pet food. We're just selling higher quality pet food. So people are moving up from that grocery store kibble to a premium product.

BEN Right.

RYAN And so that consumer journey is one that's been driving the industry because there needs ... There is a lot of transition associated and education associated with that. People, we have to reeducate how to serve fresh food. It's like, "Store it in your freezer. You put it in your refrigerator. You feed different amounts."

BEN That's right.

RYAN And so it's that education piece that I think really drives that forward.

BEN No. That's great. Because people do buy some percentage of Americans do still buy their pet food at the grocery store, so how ... Is that world slowly shifting? Is that on a pretty big lag as well?

RYAN No. There's definitely ... I mean humanization of the pet food category in general, especially in grocery, everybody's been moving up. If you look at acquisitions in the space of the larger, faster growing kibble companies are the ones that are talking about the sourcing and doing their due diligence in quality and nutrition and providing a lower carbohydrate diet. What's driving it is just excellent, excellent marketing. The biggest challenge for us is to wade through the bullshit they're selling and profits, and it's well-funded.

BEN Right.

RYAN And it's amazing to see how sticky those falsehoods are. There's been so many issues that come into the pet market about tainted pet food-

BEN Right. Right.

RYAN Because it's not highly regulated in terms of the quality, and what people are using. But yeah, that is changing and it's changing in grocery as well. The challenge, I think, is how do you communicate that value proposition to those grocery store consumers as a big brand? I think that's where, you know the same thing you're seeing in human food is those same trends. They're starting to acquire smaller companies that bolster their overall line in terms of like health and wellness by associating with different brands.

BEN Right.

RYAN The more doing better outreach, going to more grown up marketing and sampling, and doing those types of activities.

BEN Right.

RYAN So it is a changing landscape. There's mass also. Folks go to big box stores and buy pet food. That will always be the mainstay of the industry, I'm sure. But definitely for ... And the same thing, I'd say it's a little bit of akin to Whole Foods probably back in the day. That's where brands went because they were on a similar mission with the right customers and they could tell the story of the product.

BEN Right.

RYAN I think as a CPG company, the larger channel you get into, the more difficult and larger disconnect it is to do and so doing that well. So yeah, it'll be interesting to see where the premiumization of pet food stops. But I see it continuing to trend in that direction because people are having such positive experiences. I mean we're going from such a low bar, it's great to see people.

BEN Yeah, sure. Sure.

RYAN I think the bigger things, people are having positive experiences when they change their dog's diet.

BEN Right.

RYAN They're seeing just in terms of health and wellness and longevity such a positive experience. That's fueling the market. People, at the end of the day, that grassroots movement of people talking about what their feeding, how their feeding, how their dog's health is and creating that kind of community around that.

BEN No. That's excellent. Do you experience ... It's challenging to your selling frozen dog food or pet food, and cold chain's complicated. Right?

Have you experienced a lot of challenges as you've tried to grow that? As a leader at the forefront of that movement, have there been obstacles where retailers say, "Sorry, we don't have enough freezers," or, "Sorry, we don't do that. Like if you just had a kibble, I'll throw it on the shelf. No big deal." Right? How have you navigated that?

RYAN Oh yeah. It's a real estate game, for sure, getting shelf space because most stores have one to two freezers. So your product has to be really compelling to have a space there, and it's expensive because a lot of times we'll go in and support retailers with freezers. They'll bring in a freezer and we'll cover some of that cost. So it's expensive to get into the store, but it's an investment in that relationship and having that placement to be able to reach those customers.

Beyond that, the cold chain is tough. The industry, because it's predominantly it was a dry goods industry, there's been a lot of investment by distributors and retailers in that space. It's tough because a lot of our stores will actually ship mixed loads. So we'll have a dry load and then also they'll have these containers that have dry ice to transport our products, making sure that when we sign up a retailer and a distributor that, that cold chain is 100% intact and the quality of the food is being delivered without any compromises, so critical.

BEN Right.

RYAN Yeah. There's been investment in really good, multi pallet level cold chain facilities at the distributor level, and then also retail owners having redundant systems in place or having commercial freezers. But yeah, one of the challenges we had early on was some of the goods were transported on dry ice, which is extraordinarily difficult on packaging.

BEN Oh, yeah. Again, if you haven't dealt with it, it's not just cold, it's like crazy cold.

RYAN It is. I mean it just beats the crap out of packaging. I mean it is so cold that actually the packaging will break. We've had to work ... That's even beyond like on the challenge for us on the pet side

on frozen is it's even greater than on the human side. Because human side is pretty good refrigerated and frozen logistics.

BEN Right.

RYAN And so the packaging that we were using was all human grade, spec'd out for those refer trucks. But then going to the pet side of the cold chain where using dry ice where the packaging is like breaking and brittle, it's like we had to totally redo a ton of our packaging in this problem. It's touch on adhesives too.

BEN Right.

RYAN We had to change up all these little-

BEN Right. That's super interesting. Yeah. Absolutely.

RYAN These little changes you would never, ever think about.

BEN No. You just have to. You encounter it and then you adapt and respond to the issue.

When you meet an entrepreneur, maybe they're in the pet food space, maybe they have another product, what are your go to pieces of advice that you are commonly handing out to some of those folks?

RYAN Yeah. I think first, is just being humble. I had to learn on the job about these truisms I thought, these pieces of advice-

BEN You thought you already knew.

RYAN ... like all of the meet up groups and the podcasts that you hear somebody saying this advice. I had all these. "Oh, I'm not going to fall in that hole. I'm going to get out of the way of the business. I'm going to have systems in place to scale." Really understanding that you more than likely do not have those fully embodied yet.

RYAN And so for me it's staying humble, and knowing that there's always growth and progress to be had. You can't really embody that piece of advice until you really experience it. So experiential learning, I think, has been a value in having an open mind to do that.

Second is probably market fit is crucial. And starting small, I think like we talked about earlier, the farmer's market was so impactful in driving that because of the rapid iteration and the ability to test and get feedback from your customers. One of the challenges I have now is as we've grown, the disconnect between me and the customer is even larger. We're going through expanded geographies, multiple layers of retail and distribution, and how do we get connected and stay connected with our customer.

BEN Even if you're buying data, it's not the same as when you were having a face to face conversation and talking about their ... Seeing their pup actually consuming the product in front of you, all of the things that you ... The rich information that you had before, you don't have at scale.

RYAN Yeah. I think lastly is probably knowing or having a greater cause or purpose other than just money, because I don't think money is enough to carry you through the hard times. Because there's many, many times where you're taking no paycheck, you're doing the crappiest jobs you can imagine. So if you do not like this, it's unglamorous. It's probably easier to go get a job somewhere else and have lower risk and make more money.

BEN Absolutely.

RYAN And so having a mission that you're really passionate about, that will carry the momentum through when you have to wake up on those down days and grind through that, is really understanding that you're having a greater impact on the world through your product or your mission.

BEN When it's aligned with you, right? You're not just picking a mission off of ... You're not just Googling, what's a mission, or let me just pick a garden variety mission. It needs to be something. I think it requires a certain level of reflection to say, "What do I really deeply care about? How can we walk that out obviously individually, but then also as a company, as an organization, as a team?"

RYAN No. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

BEN Yeah, that's good. As we wrap up here, what are you particularly excited about? What's next for the [Bones & Co](#) and for you? Obviously you want to be present and content with where you are today, but what are you looking forward to?

RYAN Yeah. For me, it's been really exciting this last year, is the shift from carrying a lot of the business on my own shoulders to getting and building a team and watching them grow. I think for me it's been probably the most rewarding part beyond fulfilling our mission, is watching our team members grow, and watching to see how [Bones & Co.'s](#) mission can impact other people's life purpose as well. And have, well, insert a vehicle for personal growth and self-development and providing for families. That has been really instrumental in terms of learning how to be a better leader. I'm an introvert by nature and so people are not my forte.

BEN That's right. You need to be alone to recharge.

RYAN Yeah, a lot. A lot. In building that team and working with developing those deeper connections with people and empowering people for them to fulfill their life's purpose has been really meaningful and purposeful for my life.

So looking forward to building the team. We continue to grow both in product line and then geography. And then also, I think just the better job we can do communicating our message of proper nutrition for your pup, the more successful in terms of touching more dogs' lives. That's been the overarching thing was like, "How do we ..." It's amazing to me how, sometimes poorly, we have executed in terms of packaging. My first package was a clear sleeve from U-Line with a sticker that would fall off half way through.

BEN Super common. That's okay. Yeah. Absolutely.

RYAN We were still successful because the product spoke through the packaging. I've always been, now that we have more, I guess money and people and resources to do a better job at executing those things to serve our mission, that's where I get super excited about it, is "What happens if

we can have more resources to engage with our community because there are so many other ..." We are one part of a larger community, a larger movement of the raw foods movement. There's so many influencers and retailers that as we grow we can better support them and the cause in furthering the education of all pet parents.

And so by being able to do that and drive that forward is super exciting. Like you said, when it's your own passion externalized and then when the company, everything's aligned, there's no greater feeling of accomplishment and reward in anything else I do.

BEN Yeah. That's so awesome. Well, again, it's always fun to see you and talk with you. So I really just want to thank you Ryan Cummings for joining us today, for sharing your wisdom, hard fought experience. I think as our listeners understand that our mission here at the Barcode Podcast and at Barcode Media is to equip emerging consumer brands. I think it's easy to construe that as, "Oh, we're just going to give you a bunch of really quick formulas or recipes." There are some of those things along the way, but there's so much of the deeper mental and even soul level work that you have to do.

I feel like you did just a phenomenal job of guiding us through some of those issues that you've learned and grown in. Particularly, around how to have the discipline and the practice to be a healthy entrepreneur, in mind, body, spirit, all that stuff. Because again, you can chase after the money and maybe that's going to motivate you for some period of time, but then it probably will be a mirage at the end of your journey if you think that's going to solve all of your problems. Instead, are you living with purpose? Have you built the business today, and have you built yourself today into the kind of person that you can be proud of?

Again, with humility of course, but is this ... Are we on a mission? Are we trying to accomplish something greater? I feel like you did just a phenomenal job of guiding us through that, so thank you so much.

RYAN Yeah. No. Thanks for the opportunity. There's nothing more I love than connecting with other people in the community and sharing stories. It's been an amazing experience. I can't imagine doing it with a better group of people. Yeah, I hope my experiences may take the pain out of some future entrepreneur's journey along the path.

BEN That's right. That gives them even more purpose, which is really great. So again, if you're listening to us still, I want to remind you a couple of things that we ... At barcodestartup.com/podcast we provide a lot of other resources. Full transcripts of our conversation, and again, more resources that really are designed to equip you to thrive in the marketplace. So please, check that out. I just want to remind everybody, wherever you get your podcasts, to review, rate, share all the things. We want to really help other entrepreneurs out there discover what this community that we're trying to build and to provide the support, the knowledge and sometimes even like today, the soul care that you need to be successful in your journey. So thanks again for listening and we will talk to you again soon, next week.