**Ira Glass**

OK, so let's start today with this video. This woman posted it on Facebook, saying that these girls, little girls, walked up to her on the street, and after talking to them for a while, she just knew she had to record them. Zoe Chace, one of the reporters at NPR's *Planet* *Money*, saw the video online, and she's the one you showed it to me.

**Zoe Chace**

OK, so there's two little girls. They look to be about 10, 11-ish. They're in a parking lot, and the video opens, you don't see anybody, and then they run into the video, and they're right up in your face. And they are super cute.

**Asia Newson**

Excuse me, ma'am. Hi, how are you?

**Woman**

I'm fine. How are you?

**Asia Newson**

I'm fine, too. My name is Asia Newson. The name of my company is called--

**Asia And Trainee**

(TOGETHER) Super Business Girl. Our mission is to recognize the true potential in every child--

**Asia Newson**

And to develop intrinsic security that makes optimum use of their individualized talent.

**Trainee**

Yeah.

**Ira Glass**

Pause it for a second. So the girl who's talking right now, she's wearing big black glasses, but do they have--

**Zoe Chace**

No.

**Ira Glass**

Lenses in them?

**Zoe Chace**

Those are not real glasses. That's just part of her thing. And she has this little gap between her teeth that she puts right up into the camera and grins at it.

**Asia Newson**

Yeah. So let me break it down on an immensely biological basis. This awesome trainee right here is learning how to become a entrepreneur, how to make their own money and buy the things that they would need in their life.

**Ira Glass**

OK, so here she's gesturing at the other girl, the trainee, who's selling candles.

**Asia Newson**

Today I am selling some of my awesome candles, 'cause I'm raising money to buy my own school clothes and school supplies for the upcoming school year. Now I'm going to do a rap for you.

OK, now-- It's a lot of rhythm, see? Super Business Girl, Girl, Girl--

**Asia And Trainee**

(TOGETHER) Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl. Super Business Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl. Super Business Girl, Girl, Girl--

**Zoe Chace**

It gets in your head, actually, just the words "Super Business Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl." Like it gets in your head. It got into my head. And that is actually her company. Like, that is her branding. That is her selling her company, is just repeating the name of it again and again.

**Asia And Trainee**

(TOGETHER) Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl. Super Business Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl, Girl.

**Asia Newson**

That's it.

**Woman**

Get it, girl.

**Asia Newson**

Bye.

**Trainee**

Bye.

**Zoe Chace**

So at this point in the video is when she actually really introduces the thing that she's selling, which is these candles that she makes. And she just sticks the candles right into the camera. She's like, "Smell 'em." That's it.

**Ira Glass**

So when Zoe saw this video, she watched it over and over, totally charmed by this kid. But also, as a business reporter, she had all kinds of questions.

**Zoe Chace**

Like who is she? Was this real? Is this, like, a one-off? Does she do this all the time? What is Super Business Girl? Like, is that a thing?

**Ira Glass**

So Zoe tracked her down. Her name is Asia Newson. She's 11. Super Business Girl is a thing. It's a website that sells candles.

Asia lives in West Detroit, but she happened to be coming to New York City to see her family that weekend, the one that Zoe called. And that also happens to be where Zoe lives. And I asked Zoe to play me the tape of their encounter, because our program today is all about business and the kinds of people who decide to go into business, and the kinds of people who succeed in business.

**Zoe Chace**

So we meet up on 125th Street in Harlem. And basically as soon as we meet, she's-- she's with her dad, she's with her mom, she's with her cousin. And they just book it across the street to this deli.

**Asia Newson**

We're going to get our product. I'm selling my lollipops. And I'm also selling my candles. But first I'm getting my lollipops.

**Zoe Chace**

Now Asia usually sells candles back home in Detroit, but candles are heavy and hard to carry. So today in New York, they're going to sell lollipops. She buys them for $0.25 per Blow Pop and sells them for $1.

**Asia Newson**

It just-- it just makes sense to me. I won't have to spend so much on something, then I can sell it for more.

**Woman**

Mhm.

**Asia Newson**

Making 300% profit.

**Zoe Chace**

300% profit. So that's her business model. And she is so full of confidence that she basically walks right out of the deli, turns to the group of guys that are just kind of hanging out outside on the street corner, and makes the pitch to them.

**Asia Newson**

Excuse me, gentlemen. Hello, my name is Asia Newson. I'm known as Detroit's youngest entrepreneur. And the name of my company is called Super Business Girl. Today I'm selling lollipops because I'm raising money to buy my own school clothes--

**Ira Glass**

Now of course, anybody who lives in a big city has been approached by kids-- you know, selling candy, asking for a couple bucks for it, saying it goes to their education or whatever. And Zoe's been approached, and all these guys have probably been approached. Zoe says this just feels different.

**Zoe Chace**

The way that Asia sells it is way less a sort of charity move than this kind of opportunity. Like, here I am. I am very special. You should pay attention to me. I am giving you a chance to invest in my future.

**Ira Glass**

And yeah, you can hear on the tapes, people are charmed. As Asia works her way down the street, going into crowded barbershops and hair salons, they are happy to give to her.

**Asia Newson**

Because you'll make a difference in my life. Thank you for listening to my presentation.

**Man**

That was beautiful. That was beautiful. How much?

**Asia Newson**

Well, I'm only asking for $1 investment, because you'll make a strong strong impact to my education.

**Man**

I will?

**Asia Newson**

Yeah.

**Man**

[LAUGHS] You're beautiful, sugar. She's a sweetheart.

**Woman**

Oh, well, thank you for the lollipop.

**Asia Newson**

Thank you. I hope you have an awesome day.

**Woman**

And I hope you have a blessed one as well, sweetie. I'm loving you! [LAUGHS]

**Zoe Chace**

Why'd you buy it?

**Man**

Why did I buy it? To support her.

**Zoe Chace**

Why?

**Man**

It's a good cause. She's just very outspoken, very outgoing. Good personality.

**Asia Newson**

The number-one thing is give energy. Two, speak very loud, be articulate, use hand gestures, and make eye contact.

**Ira Glass**

Now this is what Asia tells other kids to do when she trains them. But of course, that is like somebody who's always been skinny giving advice to people on how to diet. This stuff just comes easily to her.

**Zoe Chace**

It is a hard thing to teach. I saw her try to make her cousin do this pitch, who was with her, and he just couldn't handle it.

**Ira Glass**

What happened when her cousin tried?

**Zoe Chace**

Um, people wouldn't really respond to him, because he was kind of looking down. He wasn't really looking at people.

**Ira Glass**

Oh, he was a kid.

**Zoe Chace**

He-- yeah!

[BOTH LAUGH]

He was a regular kid. He was a kid that was 10 years old and, like, embarrassed to be talking to adults.

**Ira Glass**

At this point, Asia has an office in a business incubator place in Detroit. She gets mentorship there, she gets classes. This, by the way, is an adult business incubator, where she is the only kid. Everybody else is grown up.

Her dad is a salesman. And he's very involved in what Asia does, which Zoe says can be a little unsettling to watch, seeing an adult stage-parent their kid this way. Though she says that Asia is so clearly into what she is doing, it really does not feel bad to watch it. It's like watching a stage parent whose kid totally loves being on stage. And for Zoe, as a business reporter, what was interesting about Asia was her instinctive comprehension of a basic business principle-- a principle that some adults don't always seem to grasp.

**Zoe Chace**

She has this kind of sophisticated understanding, it seems like, that people are just excited to invest in other people. Like it has really nothing to do with what Asia is selling, you know? Asia's selling Blow Pops that nobody wants. It's so obvious that she knows that she's just selling Asia.

And this is not something that all people that are making pitches to investors or customers or whatever get. Like, a lot of people are kind of nerds, and they're like, "This is my product. This is my platform. I built this app, or whatever it is, and I want people--"

**Ira Glass**

Right. They think the thing will speak on its merits. They have a great product.

**Zoe Chace**

Yeah, or that the idea is so special. But they don't realize that people connect to other people. But Asia knows this.

**Zoe Chace**

Do you think that you're selling more, like, you're selling, you know--

**Asia Newson**

More of myself and my services than my product? Yeah, I do. Or was that not what you were going to say? People ask me that question all the time.

**Zoe Chace**

Yeah, that's what I was gonna ask.

**Asia Newson**

That's what I thought.

**Zoe Chace**

I wasn't even there yet with my question. I was trying to tease this thing out of her the way you do, especially if it's a little kid. But she already knows. She already knows what she is.

**Asia Newson**

I was a cute girl who knew about business and who liked what I did.

**Zoe Chace**

So you know that you're cute.

**Asia Newson**

Yeah.

**Zoe Chace**

And how do you use the being cute in your business?

**Asia Newson**

[GIGGLES] Um-- [GIGGLES] I just act like me. I'm a little girl running my own business. That's the best advantage ever. But I'm 11 now, so as I'm getting older, it's kind of going away a little bit, which makes it a little harder for me to sell my candles and my suckers.

**Ira Glass**

Oh, no! She's getting older and she's losing it at 11?

**Zoe Chace**

(LAUGHING) Yeah. She knows that she's not gonna be cute forever.

**Ira Glass**

Wait, wait, wait, did she make more money when she was littler?

**Zoe Chace**

(LAUGHING) Yeah. She remembers being five and making a sales pitch, and people were more excited to give her money the littler she was.

**Ira Glass**

Luckily as she ages, she also has charisma, mentors, and plans-- big, big plans. And today on our radio show, "It's Not the Product, It is the Person," we have stories of adults who do not always seem to understand that idea as well as this 11-year-old girl does. And also of adults who do understand that they're the product, and they are struggling to live up to the job of being the product.

Just think for a second-- how does it make you feel when you know you are the product and the world is deciding not to buy? From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This* *American* *Life.* I'm Ira Glass. Stay with us.

Act One: I Got 99 Problems and a Pitch Is One

**Ira Glass**

Act One, "I Got 99 Problems and a Pitch is One." So here's a thought that's got a lot of people into a lot of trouble-- the thought, "I can do that." I can land that skateboard trick. I can start my own band. I think I want to open a bookstore. You know, I've always loved books. I could own a bookstore. There's just that moment when you go from observer to doer, can be very, very treacherous.

Well, *This* *American* *Life* producer Alex Blumberg is in the middle of this moment right now, an extreme version of this moment. For several years now, Alex has been running *Planet* *Money*. That's the podcast about economics and business that Zoe Chace works for, who you heard just a minute ago.

Recently, Alex quit that gig at *Planet* *Money*. He stopped reporting on other people's businesses, and he decided to start his own business instead. And he started recording the process of making a new business with his audio gear, because although he really doesn't know much about running a business, he knows a lot about recording conversations, and he felt like he needed something to feel good about. He has this true account of one man's journey from man to businessman.

**Alex Blumberg**

One of the great things about reporting on yourself? All the access you get. As a business reporter reporting on myself as a businessman, I would be privy to all this behind-the-scenes stuff that most businesspeople never, ever talk to reporters about.

For example, this detail. When you're going out to do something you've never done before-- meet an investor at a venture capital firm and try to convince him to give you money to start your company-- what do you wear? Suit and tie? Tech golf-shirt casual? I was on my way out the door, and my wife Nazanin stopped me and told me to change my shoes.

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

They're fine. They're just-- there'd be a higher chance that he's going to give you money if you're not wearing running shoes. Don't you think that's true?

**Alex Blumberg**

But these are the only shoes that I can wear that my feet don't hurt in. [LAUGHS]

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

Um.

**Alex Blumberg**

Like a lot of conversations between married people, what we're talking about is not actually what we're talking about. Here's what we're actually talking about. We have a two-year-old and a four-year-old. My wife has a demanding job where she works till 11 o'clock most nights a week. I'm leaving a full-time job with a good salary and benefits for an uncertain future.

Our plan, if you can call it that, is to spend down our meager savings, go into debt, and hope it works out. I have a lot of anxiety. Nazanin has a lot of anxiety-- which is all focused, at this moment, on which shoes I should wear.

**Alex Blumberg**

I don't know. You think these look better? Not sure they look better. I think these look like nursing shoes.

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

Why did you buy them?

**Alex Blumberg**

To play tennis in. [LAUGHS]

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

Oh, they're like actual tennis shoes.

**Alex Blumberg**

Yes.

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

Oh, OK. Then, yeah, wear the other ones.

**Alex Blumberg**

[LAUGHS]

There are over 28 million businesses in America. And I imagine they almost all started the way mine is-- with nothing but a story, a story I'm telling not just to my investors, but to my wife and to myself. That story that I'm telling, that we all probably tell, I'm the guy in the garage with the great idea. I am Steve Jobs.

Just not the actual Steve Jobs, of course. I am the Steve Jobs of HVAC repair, or the Steve Jobs of farm-to-table gastropubs. Or, in my case, the Steve Jobs of 20- to 40-minute weekly podcasts.

That is my business. I love podcasts. I want more of them. I looked around and there didn't seem to be anybody, inside or outside of public radio, devoted to making the kind of podcasts that I love. And then came the other thought. "Well, I could do that."

The story, though, that we tell ourselves is a lie. Most of us are, in fact, not even close to being Steve Jobs. Of the hundreds of thousands of businesses that start every year, only 3 in 10 survive out the decade.

**Alex Blumberg**

Chris?

**Chris Sacca**

How are you?

**Alex Blumberg**

Hey, how's it going?

**Chris Sacca**

Good, good, good.

**Alex Blumberg**

Thanks for meeting me.

It's Friday, lunch, mid-spring, and I'm at a hole-in-the-wall sushi place on Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles. I've flown out here from my home in New York to meet a guy named Chris Sacca. Chris is the kind of guy that people like me need to sell our story to. He's a professional investor.

Now before I was in public radio, I was a teacher, and before that, a social worker. I've worked in nonprofits my entire life. If I actually start this business, CEO of my own company will be the first full-time job in the private sector I've ever had. All this to say, Chris Sacca and I traditionally run in different circles.

But this is where covering business helps. I met Chris on a *Planet* *Money* story I worked on about the patent system and how it seemed to be slowing innovation in Silicon Valley. Chris had a lot to say on the subject, so I ended up talking to him for a while.

Years later, when I was starting this company, I reached out to him about being an investor. Honestly, he was one of the only people I knew who did this for a living, invested in stuff. And he remembered me. Turns out he's a fan of *This* *American* *Life*. And so he said, "Sure. Come on out. We'll talk."

Now I knew that Chris was successful, but I didn't realize exactly how successful until this lunch. One of Chris's first investments as an independent investor was in a company a former colleague of his at Google was starting. The colleague's name? Evan Williams. The company? Twitter. Evan showed Chris an early prototype of the idea.

**Chris Sacca**

It was compelling, and a little bit addictive, and released dopamine every time your phone buzzed with a new tweet. And it played on a little bit of narcissism and exhibitionism and exploration-- all these things were happening that were pretty exciting. And so when Ev gave me the chance to invest in that company, I found it irresistible.

**Alex Blumberg**

He wrote a check for $25,000, which he probably had no business doing. He had a little money, sure, but $25,000 was still a lot of cash to him. Unlike the majority of investors in Silicon Valley, who Chris says can break off a check for $25,000 like it's nothing, he really needed his bet to pay off. So he just started showing up at the headquarters of Twitter, trying to help out however he could.

To say that this gamble paid off is an understatement. Chris Sacca wouldn't say exactly how much he personally owns of Twitter, but at the time of Twitter's IPO, his venture fund was the single largest shareholder in the company, with a stake of roughly 15%. For Chris, what started as a single $25,000 investment is now a stake worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Now one Twitter in your portfolio is something any investor would dream of. Chris has a lot more than one. Kickstarter, Instagram, Uber-- he was an early investor in all of them. And he's developed something of a philosophy for successful investing. Sure, you evaluate the idea, you look at the numbers, kick the tires-- that's all important. But, he says, he also looks hard at the conviction of the people who are pitching him.

**Chris Sacca**

The ideas that we back and the entrepreneurs we back, there's so much conviction about the inevitability of success, it's contagious. I mean, when I first sat down with Kevin Systrom, the founder of Instagram, and he started talking about why Instagram, and pitching me on why I should get involved there, I sat down with, in the back of my mind, look, photo-sharing has been done a bunch of times. I feel lucky to have already gotten some money back out of Photobucket before. Like, I might be the one guy who's made money in photo-sharing, and there's no way lightning's going to strike twice.

But as you listen to him, you get the perception that he's actually looking through you to some spot behind you that's five years in the future. And he just knows the inevitability of the success of his platform. And by the end of the conversation, you're like, please take my money. So what starts as this, like, all right, kid, what-- whaddaya got? It's just, like, wow, let me get on this thing. The train is leaving the station.

**Alex Blumberg**

This was thrilling to hear, because that conviction, I actually feel it. And conviction, in general, is a pretty rare feeling for me. I'm much more intimate with doubt and ambivalence.

And Chris is like a teacher handing me the answers to a test he's about to give, explaining exactly what he wants to see from me in order to invest in my company. I need to project conviction. Check. And I need to instill FOMO. For you non-Millennials, FOMO is an acronym-- Fear Of Missing Out.

**Chris Sacca**

Airbnb, multi-billion-dollar business, right? I was one of the first people to see the Airbnb page. And I pulled them aside and said, guys, this is super dangerous. You're renting out a room in somebody's house while they're still there? Somebody's going to get raped or murdered, and the blood is gonna be on your hands. There's no way this'll succeed. That's a $10 billion business today that I'm not an investor in.

Dropbox. I saw the Dropbox guys, and I was like, this is great and everything, but Google's going to crush you. They have a thing internally called G-Drive, and it's going to absolutely crush Dropbox. There's no way this thing's going to succeed. That's a $10 billion business today that I'm not an investor in.

**Alex Blumberg**

"A $10 billion business that I'm not an investor in"? That is FOMO. Once you have FOMO on your side, says Chris, you no longer have to ask people like him for money. They're lining up to give it to you.

So I'd traveled out to see Chris Sacca with what's called a pitch deck, which is basically a PowerPoint on a laptop telling the story of what my company is going to do and how it's going to make money. Not surprisingly, you can read a lot on the internet about how to make a killer pitch deck. And like screenplays, pitch decks are supposed to follow a standard three-act structure. What's the problem out there? How is my company going to solve that problem? And how is solving that problem going to make huge amounts of money for everyone?

And usually there's a conference room, maybe even a large-screen monitor, where you plug your computer into, show your PowerPoint. But after lunch, Chris says, OK, let's take a walk. You can give me your pitch. And that's how it came to pass that right there on the sidewalk along West Pico Boulevard, I made my pitch to Chris Sacca.

**Alex Blumberg**

Well, I have a deck which I, like-- which, I've used with people.

**Chris Sacca**

Yeah, yeah, the deck is a crutch.

**Alex Blumberg**

It was a crutch. I got used to it. All right, so what's my-- yeah. So--

Pretty much immediately, all the confidence that I felt during the lunch evaporates. Remember the structure, Blumberg, I tell myself. Problem, solution, money.

**Alex Blumberg**

Here's the problem. In the world of audio right now, most people consume-- the kind of audiojournalism that I do, most people consume it over the radio. Those people are leaving the radio in droves, and they're migrating to digital. They're migrating to digital listening.

The number of, obviously, smartphone handsets are going through the roof. The audio dashboard is becoming digital. iTunes Radio, podcasting is all going to be on your dashboard. And there's this whole world of-- so there's all these people going there, and so I want to start a company that will create the content for all these people to listen to, who are, like, moving into the digital future-slash-present.

"Digital future-slash-present"? Who says that? It is so hard to listen back to this tape and hear myself dropping out this jargon, talking about listening to the radio as "consuming audio." I just sound like such a jerk. I sound like such a poser. And notice, the more nervous I become, the higher my voice gets.

**Chris Sacca**

So you-- you're uniquely positioned to do it because you're better at it than anybody?

**Alex Blumberg**

Yeah. I am.

**Chris Sacca**

Don't apologize for that.

**Alex Blumberg**

I'm doing so badly that Chris is now stepping in and feeding me lines. One question, he asked. What is my unfair advantage?

I knew this was a critical question, but I had no idea how to answer it. Not only do I sound like a poser, I'm the wrong kind of poser. I'm not even doing it well. Still, I sallied forth.

I explained to Chris my plan on how to make money-- ads, of course-- with a second main revenue source-- you guys, listeners. Not that we would charge for podcasts, but for those of you who don't obsessively read everything written about the future of media, there's this concept called freemium.

It basically means you make your stuff for free, and then you offer a little something extra that some percentage of your listeners will pay for. One time we did this on *Planet* *Money,* sold $600,000 worth of T-shirts. That's how I explain it now. Here's how I explained it to Chris in the language of Poser.

**Alex Blumberg**

And I believe there is a huge opportunity in audio, specifically, to really do the thing that all media's dreaming of doing, which is making this-- making this freemium model work.

And I watched Chris Sacca's face cycle from bored to confused to annoyed, I realized despite being given the answers to this test ahead of time, I'm still somehow failing. I am generating no FOMO in Chris Sacca's heart. If anything, I'm generating the opposite.

**Chris Sacca**

You gotta tighten up your story.

**Alex Blumberg**

So the--

**Chris Sacca**

Well, start again. So you've now kind of meandered. Really tight this time. How are you going to make money doing this?

**Alex Blumberg**

So you make money a combination-- so there's three major-- there's three major revenue streams.

I start again. I meander my way through the ad rates, *Planet* *Money*. At a certain point I find myself deep into an explanation of my friend's successful Kickstarter project. Chris interrupted.

**Chris Sacca**

You lost track of your own outline.

**Alex Blumberg**

Yeah, I did.

**Chris Sacca**

What you haven't given me is the outline of your story, right?

**Alex Blumberg**

Uh-huh.

**Chris Sacca**

If I were calling an Uber right now and it said it's going to be here in two minutes, and that was all the time you had--

**Alex Blumberg**

Uh-huh.

**Chris Sacca**

What are you doing?

**Alex Blumberg**

So I'm making a network of digital podcasts that we will mon-- that will-- that will-- that is going to meet-- [LAUGHS] Sorry.

I'm imagining the people out there listening right now who actually know who Chris Sacca is. I didn't realize his reputation when I first arranged to meet him. I thought he was just a rich guy in Silicon Valley.

But after enough conversations with people who were like, you're meeting with Chris Sacca? I realized that in this world, he is this huge kingpin. Not a murderous criminal-underworld kingpin-- a universally admired, really friendly billionaire kingpin that pretty much everybody with a startup idea wants as an investor. In other words, this walk we're taking along Pico Boulevard? Thousands of people would kill for this opportunity. And I'm blowing it.

At a certain point, Chris drops the pretense that this is an actual investor meeting and just starts coaching me on my pitch, feeding me questions, and then correcting my answers.

**Chris Sacca**

And so what's it going to take to do it?

**Alex Blumberg**

So it'll take a million and a half dollars, I think. And--

**Chris Sacca**

Take out the "I think."

**Alex Blumberg**

Yeah. It'll take a million and a half-- I'm looking for a million and a half to $2 million in seed-stage funding.

**Chris Sacca**

No, no, no, no, no.

**Alex Blumberg**

Yeah.

**Chris Sacca**

You were looking for a very specific amount of money.

**Alex Blumberg**

I'm looking for-- [LAUGHS NERVOUSLY]

Finally, after about an hour of this, I look over and see Chris holding up his hand.

**Chris Sacca**

Give me a second and I'm gonna give you your pitch back.

**Alex Blumberg**

All right.

**Chris Sacca**

But let me write--

**Alex Blumberg**

And then, right there, not far from the freeway overpass near Pico and Bundy, he steps into the role of me, starts giving the pitch I should be giving.

**Chris Sacca**

Hey, look, can I get two minutes from you? So here's the thing. You probably know me, producer of *This* *American* *Life,* been doing it for 15 years. You know it's the most successful radio show, top of the podcasts in iTunes, et cetera.

So here's the thing. I realize there's a hunger for this kind of content out there and there's none of this [BLEEP]. It's just a bunch of jerk [BLEEP] podcasts. Nothing's out there.

Advertisers are dying for it. Users are dying for it. And if you look at the macro environment, we're seeing more and more podcast integrations into cars. People want this content. It's a whole new button in the latest version of iOS.

So here's the thing. Nobody else can make this [BLEEP]. I know how to make it better than anybody else in the world. And so I've already identified a few key areas where I know there's hunger for the podcast. We've got the subject matter. We're going to launch this [BLEEP]. I know there's advertisers who want to get involved with it.

But here's the unfair advantage I have. Because of what I've done in my past careers with *This* *American* *Life* and with *Planet* *Money*, people are actually willing to just straight-up pay for this stuff. And I'm not just talking about traditional subscriptions. I'm talking-- we did this T-shirt experiment at *Planet* *Money* where we got $600,000 coming in, where people actually gave us money to buy a t-shirt with our logo on it as part of the content. It was integrated directly. And I know we can replicate that across these other platforms.

So here's what we're doing. We're putting together a million and a half dollars. That's going to buy us three, four guys who are going to launch these three podcasts in the next 12 months. We think very easily we could get to 300,000, 400,000 net subscribers across the whole thing.

With CPMs where they are in this market right now, I know on advertising alone, we could get to break even. But as we do more of this integration, we get people texting in to donate to this stuff, buying some of this product, doing some of these integrated episodes, I know that we're going to have on our hands here something that will ultimately scale to be a network of 12, 15 podcasts. The audience is there. They want it. Nobody else can do it like we can. Are you in?

**Alex Blumberg**

That was amazing!

**Chris Sacca**

That's your story, right?

**Alex Blumberg**

That is great. Holy [BLEEP]. I thought I was a storyteller. Now I feel bad about my job.

**Chris Sacca**

So what--

**Alex Blumberg**

That was good.

So good that I'm thinking, oh, if he pitched my idea that well, he must be into it, right? He's going to invest. But then he goes on.

**Chris Sacca**

I could come at it from the other side. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Media's very, very hard, as you know. This content's really hard to consume. It's longer form. You're counting on people spending that kind of dedicated time. I mean, you're fighting an overall trend of attention, and every other format is going to shorter and shorter content pieces. And so you're actually swimming upstream with that stuff.

You have a lot of platform risk, because you're depending upon Apple and Google to distribute your content. The kind of stuff you're doing with *Planet* *Money* is exciting, but it's all under the veil of being a nonprofit. People feel a moral obligation to contribute to those kinds of things. You come outside from under the public radio veil, and you have to worry about whether people are going to be a little bit jaded and feel like they don't necessarily need to donate to a for-profit company to make for-profit content for guys who are doing this for equity and hoping to get rich.

You know, frankly, you think you might actually be uniquely qualified to do this, but we've started to see more and more news podcasts make their way out there. Some stuff from Khan Academy is moving up the ladder right now. So ultimately, you're not going to be the only guys in here, and it's going to be pretty competitive. Audio is kind of a niche market, and so I don't know. I don't-- I don't know if this is a fit for us.

**Alex Blumberg**

At this point, I have no idea what to think. I'm drained, my pits are drenched, and Chris Sacca has just given me two completely convincing cases in favor of and against investing in my business. Whatever shred of conviction I had about this process at the beginning is gone.

I also learned something about how investors like Chris see the companies they might invest in. I came out here thinking I could build a nice profitable business, but Chris isn't looking for profitable. He's looking for Twitter, something huge. Or if not Twitter, then at least a company he could sell to Twitter or some other big company.

He asked me this question. What would the exit be? And by that he means, what large company will buy your company in three to five years so investors like me can get our money back at 10 to 100 times the amount we put in?

I hadn't really thought about that question. I don't know if I want anyone to buy me. This experience with Chris makes me realize this simple vision I have, it's not a vision people like him are looking to invest in.

This was my big chance, a huge Silicon Valley investor with enough money to snap his fingers and get me started on my new life, and I'd blown it. My failure, it seemed clear, had nothing to do with my shoes.

**Ira Glass**

Alex Blumberg is not quite a businessman in New York City. As he continues trying to start his business, he's going to be documenting each painful step-- and the occasional success, too, we hope-- on a new podcast. The podcast is called "StartUp." One quick sample. In the episode where Alex tries to come up with a name for his company, he gets his wife, Nazanin, to weigh in on one of the leading contenders.

**Alex Blumberg**

Orelo.

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

Orelo? What is that? What is that supposed to mean?

**Alex Blumberg**

Well, it's, uh-- it's "ear" in Esperanto.

**Nazanin Rafsanjani**

[BURSTS OUT LAUGHING]

Oh, my god!

[CONTINUES LAUGHING]

That's so dumb. That's so dumb.

**Ira Glass**

The "StartUp" podcast is that hearstartup.com. That's hear, H-E-A-R, startup.com. Coming up, Mike Birbiglia and why anyone starting a business lives low to the ground. That's in a minute from Chicago Public Radio when our program continues.

Act Two: The Business of Show

**Ira Glass**

It's *This* *American* *Life*. I'm Ira Glass. Each week on our program, of course, we choose a theme, bring you different kinds of stories on that theme. Today's show, "It's the Person, Not the Product." We have stories of businesses in their very early stages and the people trying to start them, and what happens when you know the most important thing you need to do is to win over people, make friends, influence people, and you also know you are not doing it. We've arrived at Act Two of our program. Act Two, "The Business of Show."

**Mike Birbiglia**

Being a comedian, I have to say, is-- it's a little bit like starting a business where no one wants that business to exist. Really. Like, no one. Not your family, or your friends, or the audience. And in so many ways, they're right.

**Ira Glass**

They're right, of course, because you are bad. That is comedian Mike Birbiglia. And he says at first you just do not know what you're doing. And he says that the normal laws of supply and demand, they apply to the comedy business. And so at first, there is no demand for you and your services. He tells this story from his early days trying to start the business of his own comedy career out of nothing, with nobody believing in him.

**Mike Birbiglia**

When I moved to New York 13 years ago to become a comedian, my parents were very upset, because my-- and they really, really were. They were very concerned. My dad is a doctor, my mom is a nurse-- those are professions where people help other people and are ashamed of their artistic children.

But my parents were so worried when I moved to New York. And in fairness, I mean, I was really struggling. I was broke. I was living on an air mattress in Queens. I couldn't afford a dresser for my clothes.

When you're broke, everything is low to the ground, you know? Like, you roll off your air mattress in the morning. You grab some pants from the floor. You cook noodles on a hot plate. One falls out of your mouth, you're like, "Aw, it's not too far!" You know?

And I couldn't even get past at the clubs in New York City, which is the real only reason I moved there. So I drove my mom's station wagon around the country to areas of lesser comedy concentration, places like Ohio and West Virginia and New Jersey. And I bought my mom's car. That's an important detail. Because I found out recently that sometimes when people's parents have faith in their child's dreams, they'll just give them their car.

My mom upcharged me on the station wagon. She got the full *Blue* *Book* value for the vehicle. She was like, this guy just doesn't have it. I gotta get the short money out now.

I remember this particularly low point for me when I was performing in a comedy club in New Jersey, and I was driving back down the ramp into the Lincoln Tunnel, and towards my air mattress in Queens. And the cop just sort of waved me over. You realize, when you're broke, that cops will just pull you over if you have a crappy car to see what else you've got going wrong in your life. They'll just be like, "You! Come here. We're going to figure out what you've done."

And the cop says, "License and registration." As I'm pulling out my license, I'm realizing that it is expired by three weeks. So he was right.

And I had that moment where I'm thinking, wait, should I preface this conversation with this key piece of information? Like, "All right, you're not gonna like this!" You know, like, "Same team! We both think I'm an idiot!"

I didn't mention it. He goes back to the cruiser. He's there for 15 minutes, because there's a lot to do. And then when he comes back, he's a little more stern. He says, "Did you know that your license is suspended?"

Yeah. See, I didn't-- I didn't know what suspended meant. I was very naive. Apparently I had an unpaid speeding ticket from high school, and my family moved. They don't forward registry mail, and so I said to him, and I quote, I said, "Yes. No. Wait, what does suspended mean?"

And he said, "Please step out of the car." And I said, "No, no, no, I'm serious. I don't know what suspended means," thinking we were having away a witty repartee.

And he says, "Please step out of the car." And so I step out of the car. And he says, "You're under arrest." And I said, "I don't think so." And he says, "Yes, I'm sure of it." And then he cuffs me up against the car and put me in the back of the cruiser.

Here's what I didn't know about when you get arrested. This is a revelation. They don't have to take you to jail right away. So I'm in cuffs, watching through the windshield, as this guy is just hanging out with his cop buddies, having a great time, laughing, like, "Hahaha! The Mets!" or whatever. "Ah, I arrested this guy for nuttin'!" You know?

And so I'm afraid. And then I'm sweaty. And then I'm itchy. I had an itch on my face. And I didn't have any extremities available to scratch the itch. And so I'm looking around, like the character from *No* *Country* *for* *Old* *Men,* and I see a door handle. And I'm like, OK, I can work with this. And I reach my face over. And I'm scratching it against the door handle.

But that just creates more itches-- on my face, on my shoulder, on my chin. And then I'm sort of writhing around in circles in the back of the cruiser like a dog trying to shake his medical cone. And the cop looks back. He's like, "We got a live one!"

"What the hell are you doing?" I'm like-- (DESPERATELY) "Will you scratch my face?" Apparently they never do that. It turns out no one's even asked before, which is crazy to me.

The officer booked me at the Weehawken, New Jersey jail. And he even took the shoelaces out of my shoes, because apparently it's a very common thing when people's licenses are suspended because they hang themselves. And I don't like to joke about it. It's called suspension post-suspension. All too common. Under-reported.

And and then he took a mug shot of me. And he knew I was-- he knew I'd performed at a comedy club that night, and so he took an extra one, and he put it in his pocket. And he goes, "This is in case you ever get famous."

Which I thought was nice. 'Cause at least he's rooting for me. I mean, sure, he's arresting me now, but long-term, this guy sees it. Which is more than I can say for my mom. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

**Ira Glass**

Mike Birbiglia. His 100-city comedy tour includes The Chicago Theatre and two cities in New Jersey. Details at birbigs.com.

[MUSIC - "DRIVING ON 9" BY THE BREEDERS]

Act Three: The Other Real World

**Ira Glass**

Act Three, "The Other Real World." You know, when you start a business, it usually takes over your life, at least for a while. This last story is about somebody throwing herself into a business plan that is really actually an entire life plan to last a lifetime. The story was produced for a podcast called *Love + Radio*. And this story is unusual in so many ways and is just great. The woman who's speaking in the story is named Taylor Rose Nations. Here's Taylor.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

When I was a nursing assistant, I took care of a lady who couldn't chew any food. Bad teeth, she didn't want to go get them pulled out-- she was so old. She just, like, was cool with drinking juice the rest of her life. And her family decided that it would be better for her to get her teeth pulled and get dentures. She ended up getting her teeth pulled. And after that, she refused to eat. And she ended up just dying.

After somebody dies, we strip the bed, sanitize the room. It's this whole thing. And the next patient called me in and she asked me, "Did somebody just die in this bed?" And I said, "Uh, yeah. [LAUGHS] They did." And she said, "I thought so, because they just bit me."

And I was just like, what are you talking about? And she said, "Yeah, they just bit me, and I reached back to where they bit me and I found this." And it was a tooth, like a full tooth with, like, the roots and-- And I said, "Are you sure that's not your tooth?" And she was like, "I'm pretty sure I'd know if I lost a tooth."

If I hadn't had those experiences, I would probably 100% say, like, you just die. You stop living. But who knows? I haven't died yet. I don't believe in, like, an afterlife in a biblical sense or anything like that. I kind of think you probably just stop being.

I think there are probably a lot of things that I'll miss. My family, and books. Pizza, and beer, especially. If nobody's actually looked at the website, I think it kind of sounds crazy. I think most people think I'm, like, getting sucked into some weird cult.

I literally never go to the doctor, so I was nervous anyway. Having to make that appointment kind of made this a little bit more real an experience. Vision test, colorblind, hearing, breathing, blood work, blood pressure. Then I had to have an EKG done. Pelvic exam.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

You had to get like a gynecologist, too?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Yeah.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

Really?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Like the whole thing.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

What is the-- do you know what the purpose of that was?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

I think the whole thing is just to make sure that you're completely disease-free. Like you don't have cervical cancer or, you know, AIDS.

I work as a chemist. That's my-- basically my first job out of college, and I don't want to work there forever. My mixing station and where I do a lot of research and development is on the same bench as my computer, so I just stream *The* *Bachelor* and work on formulas. [LAUGHS] And then quickly pause it if anybody came in. Minimize!

**Clare Crawley**

Then don't tell me you love [BLEEP] me. Don't tell me that. That, to me, is not a man.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

*The* *Bachelor* is a very silly show where a bunch of ladies try to date the same guy. The Bachelor might offer you the key to the fantasy suite. You can take it or you can pass.

**Juan Pablo Galavis**

That I want to propose to you.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Juan Pablo, who is The Bachelor now, the season I applied for--

**Juan Pablo Galavis**

I'm 100% sure.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Super cute.

**Juan Pablo Galavis**

That I-- I just-- I want to let you go.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

I am in. I'm single. Uh, I got nothing going on. I'll be on *The* *Bachelor*. You get to go fly around the world and go on all these crazy dates, go to the fantasy suite if you want to. [LAUGHS] Totally in.

**Juan Pablo Galavis**

I like you a lot. A lot. So, um--

**Taylor Rose Nations**

So I kept joking that if my *Bachelor* application fell through, at least I'd have this to fall back on. Which was kind of funny, because my *Bachelor* application did fall through, and-- and here I am.

They had said by the end of December 2013, we'll hear something. That week comes, I realize I hadn't heard anything. I want to hear something soon. And I woke up, and I always check my email in the morning on my phone. And I got that letter, and like, did the whole eye-rubbing, like, "No way!" thing.

"Dear Miss Taylor Rose Nations, you and only 1,057 others around the globe have been preselected as potential candidates to launch the dawn of a new era, human life on Mars. Congratulations, you have made it to the next round. Now catch your breath."

**Electronic British Female Voice**

Mars One will establish human settlement on Mars in 2023. In that year, the first group of four humans will land on Mars.

**Woman**

The Dutch organization Mars One hopes to build a community of settlers on the planet.

**Electronic British Female Voice**

Every two years after that, another group will join the settlement.

**Man**

It's an idea belonging to Bas Lansdorp.

[APPLAUSE]

**Bas Lansdorp**

I am Bas Lansdorp, and I am organizing a human mission to the planet Mars in the year 2023.

**Electronic British Female Voice**

Mars One has designed a mission that is much simpler than previous designs for Mars missions. The most significant simplification is that the crew is actually going to stay and live on Mars with the intention to remain there for the rest of their lives.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Jumped out of bed. My roommate was down the hall, and I was knocking on her door, freaking out. I'm like Megan! I'm going to Mars! She said, "That's [BLEEP] awesome!"

I'm, like, just sitting in the living room, thinking, like, this could actually happen. I'm just rereading that letter over and over and realizing that I didn't feel-- I didn't feel scared about it. I wasn't worried.

When I told my dad, I was in Whistler, and he had been watching *Game* *of* *Thrones*, which I got him for Christmas. I told him I had been accepted and that there were 1,000 of us left. It was silent on the phone for like 30 seconds. He got all teary, and said, "Aw, you're going to Mars, and Ned Stark's getting his head chopped off. What's next?"

The one-way mission means we don't ever get to come home. But we're going to be setting up camp there. A lot of people have been talking to me, like, is this a scam? You had to pay $35 to apply. Do they just want your money?

"Don't go! You're just a human guinea pig." I don't mind. If I can go to Mars and be a human guinea pig, I'm willing to sort of donate my body to science.

I feel like it's worth it for me, personally, and it's kind of a selfish thing, but just to turn around and look and see Earth, like that's a lifelong, like, total dream. Never thought in a million years that that would be something I could ever experience. That, to me, is worth the whole thing, worth, like, my spaceship crashing or getting taken advantage of. To me, that in itself is worth it.

Oh, you know what? They did have a handicapped girl. They had a chick-- whoa! They have a pregnant one?

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

And so this is the season that you applied for, right?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Yeah. I sent out my application for *The* *Bachelor* and Mars One around the same time.

**Juan Pablo Galavis**

I take a step back and I see them, and I'm like, wow, you're lucky, man.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

All the girls, they have, like, 30 seconds to sell themselves to this dude when they walk out of the limo. Some of them tumble out and do gymnastics, and others have prepared jokes.

**Chris Harrison**

Hi, I'm Chris Harrison.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Oh. Here he is. Love that guy.

**Chris Harrison**

Welcome to the new season of *The Bachelor*.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

And how do you think that's going to be, going from a view of reality TV to being the person that could potentially be in a lifelong reality TV show?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Unlike *The* *Bachelor*, where you're on a show and it's a season, and you go and you vacation and make out with Juan Pablo, like, if you actually get selected for Mars One, it's the rest of your life. So it's probably really important to be completely authentic. That way you're not selected on false pretenses, and-- and then you end up hating everything. [LAUGHS] And, yeah.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

And you're going to be there with only three other people, right?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Mhm. That's the plan.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

Do you ever think to yourself, like, that's not a lot of options for potential sexual partners?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

[LAUGHS] Mm, yes. But I also think at least initially, we will basically just be trying to survive. And so we probably won't be-- well, I don't know. I don't know. Yeah, I've thought about that a little bit. But also, four more people are coming in two years, so that's like seven people. [LAUGHS] Water, food, a good book, and a vibrator-- you're set. [LAUGHS]

So I had submitted my application to Mars One probably a few months prior to submitting my video. You don't have to do it all at once. So we developed a little script about me in the future, when Earth's gone to [BLEEP]. And it's really dorky and it's awful. And hope nobody's ever seen it or will ever watch it.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

My name is Taylor. The date is March 10, 2085. And I'm here in America. Things on Earth are getting worse every day.

With the rising sea levels, we're all forced to live so close to each other, and disease is spreading rampantly. We've got no food. We've got no drinking water left. What is available as being hoarded by those with money. People are dying in the streets of dehydration and starvation.

The hurricanes are coming almost constantly now, and there's no escaping them. I fear that the end is near. Why did we not do something about this while we had the chance? Why did we not expand beyond Earth? Why did we not go to Mars?

**Man**

Status Buster?

**Man**

Go.

**Man**

Chancey?

**Man**

Go.

**Man**

Go ahead and throttle up, CAPCOM. Fido?

**Man**

Go.

**Man**

Buster?

**Man**

Go.

[VOICES CONTINUE AND FADE]

**Taylor Rose Nations**

It's funny how much added value everyday experiences kind of have when you know that you-- in 10 years, you might not have any of those anymore. I guess it's kind of like if you know when you're going to die. Like, your know when your day on Earth is. All of your days up to that day will be so much more important, and you'll experience them so much more than if you were just going on like everybody else. Especially at night, when it's windy and dry, I'm just like, I only have a set amount of these left.

**Arno Wielders**

This is extraordinary project. No taxpayers' money will be involved.

We will finance this mission by creating the biggest media event ever around.

**Woman**

It's a *Big* *Brother*-style competition.

**Arno Wielders**

This is going to be a media spectacle. *Big Brother* will pale in comparison.

So everybody can watch as we progress, the astronauts are selected, as they go into training, and as they explore Mars.

The whole world will be watching and experience this journey.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

I kind of feel like 1,058 people just volunteered for a tribute, like *The* *Hunger* *Games*. And we're all just kind of like standing around, wondering what's going to happen.

When I picture the launch, I picture a lot of media. From that point forward, our entire lives will be televised.

I think the lead-up to takeoff is going to be harder than post-takeoff, because it's, like, all this attention, and-- and you have to kind of be a public figure. Nobody knows who I am right now, but 10 years from now, people will, if things go as planned.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

But it seems like you're-- like that would definitely be attention on you.

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Mhm.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

You know, how do you think you're going to handle that as someone who's sort of nervous?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

I think it's getting easier. I feel like every year, I sort of feel a little bit more comfortable in my own skin, if that makes sense. I still do the whole awkward robot thing, but now I just embrace it. [LAUGHS]

So it's gotten less-- it's still hard. But I feel like I've been purposely putting myself out there a lot more than I have. I'm trying to put myself in social situations where I don't know people, and like, I have to learn to talk to people. Or, like, I've been going on dates a little bit.

But I'm not at all in a rush to commit to anything. Not looking for long-term relationships. I've got 10 years, people.

You know, I think about it a lot, that I only have one life to live and I can choose to do whatever I want with it. So I can choose to stay in Olympia and hang out here and play roller derby and ride my motorcycle and live life that way. Or if I choose to go to medical school, that'll be another path. And so given the choice, I feel like it's kind of an easy decision.

**Elizabeth Jenkins**

If you do get to that next round, it's for keeps. You know, you're not going to be able to leave the planet. What if you get there and it sucks?

**Taylor Rose Nations**

Yeah, that-- that would suck. It probably will suck pretty-- like, it will suck, I'm sure. But you-- you get to know that your life is about something bigger than just, like, paying your bills and living and dying and being boring.

**Ira Glass**

That story was produced by Elizabeth Jenkins for the podcast *Love + Radio*-- which, I have to say, has some of the most emotionally complicated stories and portraits of people that anybody is doing anywhere. It's on the Radiotopia network. I totally recommend it. This story was edited and mixed by Nick van der Kolk and Brendan Baker. You can find *Love + Radio* at loveandradio.org.

Credits

**Ira Glass**

Well, our program was produced today by Nancy Updike and myself with Alex Blumberg, Ben Calhoun, Sean Cole, Stephanie Foo, Chana Joffe-Walt, Sarah Koenig, Miki Meek, Jonathan Menjivar, Brian Reed, Robyn Semien, Alissa Shipp. Our senior producer is Julie Snyder. Production help from JP Dukes. Seth Lind is our operations director. Emily Condon's our production manager. Elise Bergerson's our administrative assistant. Adrianne Mathiowetz runs our website.

Research help today from Benjamin Anastas and Michelle Harris. Music help from Rob Geddis. Special thanks to LaShante Goffigan.

Our website, thisamericanlife.org. *This* *American* *Life* is delivered to public radio stations by PRX, the Public Radio Exchange. Thanks as always to our program's co-founder, Torey Malatia. You know, I always thought of him as the general manager of a public radio station, but if you ask him, he see himself more like this.

**Asia Newson**

I'm a little girl running my own business.

**Ira Glass**

I'm Ira Glass. Back next week with more stories of *This* *American* *Life*.