

The Startup Survival Podcast by Peter Harrington

Series 2 Getting Better, Going Further

Transcript: Episode 4 – Stitching Entrepreneurial Life Together with Lisa Comfort



March 2021

Speaker 1 ([00:11](#)):

Well hello again, and welcome back to the Startup Survival Podcast with me, Peter Harrington. Hopefully the true lies uncovered by Diana Kander in episode three, when considering market research and customer feedback got you thinking. But if the wander into the weird and wonderful world of customer discovery and human irrationality left you scratching your head, get a drink, sit back and make yourself comfortable. For this episode is a story. A true story, all about Lisa and her entrepreneurial, bravery and determined defiance through the most challenging of times.

Speaker 1 ([00:55](#)):

This second series is all about getting better and going further. I want you to develop critical skills and understanding that will give any business with which you are involved, a better chance of surviving and preferably thriving. This episode is a case study or rather a case story. This episode looks at new venture creation, business growth, as well as survival through the lens of the owner. My hope is that by tuning in you develop a more informed and richer perspective of life within an entrepreneurial business. In this Frank honest and at times emotional interview, my guest, Lisa comfort, talks about her business background, how her original craft retail company grew over a decade and how she expanded the business across borders whilst also starting new ventures.

Everything Lisa shares leads up to the pandemic. You will learn how Lisa's extensive fashion industry training with some famous names, utter customer focus, highly intelligent approach to business growth, as well as deep self-belief brought her success. And like Diana Kander, who publicly shared biting critical reviews of her own work, Lisa talks openly about getting through some of the most difficult times in her life. You'll discover how she worked to confront the pandemic. You'll also learn why COVID is not the biggest challenge Lisa has faced whilst in business.

Speaker 1 ([02:32](#)):

Before we hear from Lisa comfort and learn about her company 'So over It', it's important to provide some wider context for this case story. Whether you are listening in 2021 or 2041, you should know what

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research is saying about the British economy right now. What's it really like for people running a startup or small business? Well, as part of my research, I found a report from the London School of Economics published on Wednesday, the 27th of January, 2021.

The report led with the following headline: More than 900,000 UK, small businesses at risk of failing by early April. That report goes on to say that nearly one in seven UK businesses are at great risk of imminent closure and that without further government intervention, the impact on jobs is grim. Keen to get my hands on more startup and small business intelligence I turned to the highly informative website, 'Nimblefins'. Full of comparison data, Nimblefins provides a wealth of startup and business statistics. London, for example, maybe the most popular place to start a business, but fewer than 40% of all startups in the capital make it to their fifth birthday. And the site also reports nearly 350,000 UK businesses with zero to four employees launched in 2018. In the same year and category just over 300,000 ventures closed. Startup life is demanding and it has a habit of finding our weaknesses. As shared by Joshua Anthony in series one: Start-up is the ultimate personal development program.

Speaker 1 ([04:15](#)):

So it's timely that I introduce Lisa as she is someone who knows that startup program only too well. Lisa comfort created 'So over It' in London in 2011, with one main aim - to teach as many people as possible to sew. She loves fashion and after learning to sew as a teenager, Lisa simply wanted to share her interest and passion with others. And I'm delighted. She is here now to share her story. Lisa, welcome to the startup survival podcast.

Speaker 2 ([04:49](#)):

Thank you. Thank you for having me on here.

Speaker 1 ([04:52](#)):

Lisa, I'm delighted that through the magic of the online airwaves, you are with me on this show. To kick off, can you share a bit more about so over it and what you do?

Speaker 2 ([05:03](#)):

Of course. So Sew over It is essentially a business that teaches people how to sew and at the moment we're predominantly based on teaching people how to make their own clothes. But also we're sort of broadening that into making, just getting more and more people to pick up a needle and thread, and then having a go. Whether that's clothes or just fixing something or making a cushion. And we do that through our online classes. We have an online learning platform called 'Stitch School'. We also have dressmaking patterns that we sell digitally and printed as well. And we also sell fabric. And then we put out an incredible amount of content across our social media channels, YouTube, Instagram, et cetera, et cetera, to encourage and inspire people to sew. So we're kind of trying to inspire as well as trying to teach.

Speaker 1 ([05:56](#)):

Your company is based in the UK, but you work all over the world now?

Speaker 2 ([06:00](#)):

Yeah, yeah, I guess so. So I started the business in, Clapham in South London back in 2011. And at that point it was just a bricks and mortar shop. And the business in its infancy was just me running it day-to-day and running classes from that shop and how the business has changed over the past 10 years is it's become

more of an online business. And through the social media channels, it's become much more of an international business. So now our customer base is 65% in the UK, around 17% in the US. And then Europe, Australia, Canada as well. So it really has become so much more than just a local London business.

Speaker 1 ([06:45](#)):

So what are you supplying to people internationally?

Speaker 2 ([06:48](#)):

The ways that we teach people. So I do live sew alongs every week on YouTube and they are watched by people all over the world. They tune in. So essentially I'm teaching them there. We also do some zoom virtual events where again, they tune in from all over the world. And then we have our online classes that people can watch in their own time. And again, we're getting that international audience for those. And then in addition to that, they are buying the products that we sell as well, particularly the digital products. I mean, that was the appeal with doing digital products is you basically can reach people all over the world and they have that sense of immediacy. They can buy something and then straight away that's sitting in their inbox and they can download it and access it.

Speaker 1 ([07:32](#)):

And what's the scale and popularity of these events?

Speaker 2 ([07:37](#)):

Five years ago, I started YouTube and I started off the back of the publicity for one of my books. So I've published two books with Penguin, Random House. And one of the publicists sort of said, you know, would you be up for doing a YouTube video? And off the back of that, I then started regularly putting up YouTube videos. And at the time, no one in the sewing community was really doing them. So I used to do this thing called a 'Fabric Hall' where I show people fabric that I bought or got from our shop. And then at the end of the month, I'd show them all the things that I made out of it. And that became quite an iconic thing for 'Sew over It'. And of course now it's been, you know, lots of people are doing Fabric Halls and makes videos and things, but at the time we were the only people doing it.

Speaker 2 ([08:19](#)):

And then through that, whereas we sort of pioneered through that. People kind of started watching it more and more. And so the following that we have on YouTube, I think we've got around 60,000 subscribers. But the sew along element of it was actually born from the pandemic. So when the pandemic struck back in March and we all went into lockdown, I had this idea within a week or so, I said, you know, what are we going to do? How are we going to connect all of our followers and continue to teach because we can't physically do that. And I thought, well, what about if we use one of our patterns and ideally some fabric that we've got that we're selling on our online shop and we basically sell it live. And so that's what I do. I take one of our patterns and I sew it whilst I chat to the people watching.

Speaker 2 ([09:11](#)):

So if you do a live stream on YouTube, you've got all of the comments coming up. And obviously that's quite hard to keep on top of that. On top, on top of me sitting there trying to run through the pattern and what we're doing, but one of the team will sit somewhere else, wherever they are based that day. And they'll answer the comments and it's become this amazing online community. I mean, at times at the peak

of the pandemic, there'll be about a thousand people tuning in live. Now, as people's lives are sort of gone back to some sort of normality and they're not as locked down necessarily. We're not getting the huge numbers live more like 200 people live with tuning in, but then it goes automatically onto our channel afterwards as a pre, as a recorded thing. And we're getting about 3000, 4,000 views on them. So people tend to watch them in their own time if they can't join the live. But we chose to do the live at one o'clock UK time so that we were able to capture the majority of our customers. But we have customers on the West coast of the U S who are getting up at five thirty in the morning to join in on these lives, because they've also, we've created this sort of community. And so people have made friends through it. So they, they join in for the social element as well.

Speaker 1 ([10:24](#)):

Wow. I now get how your use of social media has enabled you to scale the business. Lisa, it's fascinating to hear firsthand how you've expanded a retail business so well into the digital space. But, but let's go back to the very beginning. If I may, before you even had your first shop, you trained with some iconic designers, didn't you?

Speaker 2 ([10:47](#)):

So yeah, I worked for most known, Bruce Oldfield who is a couture designer. So he makes one off very expensive pieces for the likes of the Royals. He did a lot for princess Diana back in the day, and he now still does things for Middleton family and other Royals around the world. So my background educationally, so I actually did a degree in French and Italian, and I always wanted to do something to do with fashion and sewing, but because I was quite academic, I was pushed down a kind of more academic route or not pushed, just gently steered. And whilst I was doing my Erasmus year in Italy, I found a tailoring, a local tailoring course, and sort of started learning pattern, cutting and tailoring on the side. And then when I finished my degree, I moved to London didn't really know what I wanted to do.

Speaker 2 ([11:40](#)):

In fact, my first job was recruiting investment bankers. I got that but left after about two months. I realized it was definitely not for me, I didn't really know what I was doing. And I was just doing a process of elimination and I realized, look, I, I love fashion. I want to work in this world, but I haven't got anything that will help me get into it. So I secretly applied to London College of Fashion. I didn't tell my parents or friends, because I thought if I don't get in there, that'll be embarrassing. I got in. So this is to do another degree. And then I thought, right, okay, I'm going to have to tell them now.

Speaker 1 ([12:12](#)):

So Lisa, you are back in full-time education, you have discovered your sense of purpose, but I imagine debts are climbing and you're probably studying and working very hard to make ends meet.

Speaker 2 ([12:23](#)):

Living in London was pretty difficult. So I had a million and one jobs and I would literally finish my uni days and then rush to go and do one of the jobs that I was doing. And whilst I was there, I was always very, very consciously aware that you had to get work experience. That was the way that you got into things. You know, very few jobs, especially in the fashion industry are advertised. It's about who, you know, how you put yourself out there. And so I was very lucky that my boyfriend's mum at the time, once was a ghost writer and she 10 years previously had actually written a Bruce Oldfield biography. And so she said, look,

you know, I could probably see if I could get you an interview with him or chat at least. And so I went to chat with him and we got on quite well.

Speaker 2 ([13:08](#)):

And he said, look, you can come and do some work experience here on top of your degree. And then whilst I was with him I must have made some impression because he about six months after he said, look, Lisa pack in your degree. You've already, you know, you've already got one degree. Come work for me. And so I'd been at London College of Fashion for a year and I decided to leave because the reason why I was gone, I'd gone to London College of Fashion, was to get this kind of opportunity and it happened already. So I went to work for him, which was incredible. And well, I worked at his as his production assistant. So I'd be the liaison between the workroom and the studio. And then I went on to work for somebody called Philippa Lepley who's in very high-end couture, bridal wear.

Speaker 2 ([13:56](#)):

And I thought at that point that I wanted to be a wedding dress designer, but I realized quite quickly that wedding dresses were very monotonous, very dull, and actually brides really are a nightmare. And as a business model, it's very hard to scale and very hard to, to really, you know, I knew that the amount of work going into it, it would be very hard to, to make good, good profits on it. So I kind of thought this definitely isn't for me, but it was still very interesting to learn all the things that I learned.

Speaker 1 ([14:30](#)):

So with all that high quality training and experience behind you, did you know, you wanted to start out on your own straight away?

Speaker 2 ([14:39](#)):

I always knew that I wanted to have my own business. My dad had run his own business and I had always been found that kind of lifestyle attractive. I just sort of had that innate idea in me that I just wanted to have my own business, but I was also very aware that, you know, I didn't want to just come straight out of uni and start a business. I wanted to get more experience and I didn't really know what business I wanted to do. And I think also when I was at Bruce Oldfields as well, I was teaching, I was tutoring French to children that kind of GCSE level going around to people's homes. And I was doing that. And then I thought, hang on a second. I could do this with sewing. I wonder if, and if, you know, there's people who would like me to come and teach them how to sew, because that was still very much, you know, part of me just as much as the languages, if not more.

Speaker 2 ([15:28](#)):

And so my friend's brother set me up a website and I started teaching private lessons. I think I did a little bit of Google, Google ad words to get myself kind of appearing in searches. And I would go around London with my sewing machine teaching people how to sew. And so that was something I did purely just to make more money really, because working in the fashion industry, you don't earn very much. And I don't think at that point, I thought this was going to be the big business idea, but I, you know, I was enjoying doing it. And then I actually got very poorly. I went to Morocco on a holiday and still, we don't really know what it was, but they thought it was Meningitis. And I was in hospital very, very poorly for a few weeks.

Speaker 2 ([16:18](#)):

And when I came out of that I, I think I was really angry at my boss then because she had not paid me decent holiday pay. And I just thought, do you know, what, what am I doing? I should just bite the bullet. This is life is too short. I'm going to start this business. So I spoke to her and I said, look, you know, I want to start my own business. And I think she'd always knew. She'd always seen that side of me and sort of was like, I knew you probably wouldn't last for this long. You know, I could tell that when I first met you that you'd be off and onto something else. And so she said, but you know, we'd love to keep you on. So why don't you work part time here whilst you're setting up your business? And so then it was about six months from sort of to some point in 2010, to when I opened the shop in 2011, that I spent finding a property, you know, finding commercial space and then kind of setting it up, setting up the business in you know, the properly and getting a better site and all of that sort of thing. And then opening my doors here on the 3rd of May, 2011,

Speaker 1 ([17:21](#)):

Opening a shop in London must be an expensive business I imagine. Can you share a bit about costs, for example, how much money did you have to make just to break even

Speaker 2 ([17:32](#)):

Just to breakeven? Probably, it wasn't because at that point it was just myself doing absolutely everything. I had a couple of freelance teachers helping out, but I wouldn't have had to pay them if I didn't have people booked on for the classes. So it was probably five, six grand a month.

Speaker 1 ([17:53](#)):

A month?

Speaker 1 ([17:54](#)):

A month.

Speaker 1 ([17:56](#)):

Believe me, when starting any business, having to sell 6,000 pounds worth of goods or services a month simply to make a penny of profit is no picnic. But whilst nothing is ever guaranteed. Lisa had all the critical business foundations in place by teaching freelance. She had nurtured a loyal customer base by working with key people in the industry. She had developed a growing network and trusted reputation, and she had received some of the best training available. But perhaps most importantly of all, Lisa absolutely knew this is what she wanted to do. So how did things go when you opened your shop doors for the first time? Lisa?

Speaker 2 ([18:41](#)):

So we have, I mean, in the first year I was actually featured in an article in the Evening Standard where they asked me, this was about a month after I'd opened or two months after it opened. And they asked me to forecast what I thought the turnover of the first year would be. And I think I forecast £150,000 based on how well we were already doing. And I think we beat that. I think I got about £175,000 in the first year.

We've then grown to almost about 900,000, almost a million was the most turnover we've we've ever got. I've ever reached. However, one lesson along the way, I was always so focused on turnover and that's how I got to know how amazing would it be if we got to a million pounds, you know, turnover. And then some that just would be incredible. But actually, you know, when we did get to one of our most high turnover years, we weren't profitable at all. You know, barely, you know, it was something like 3% profit.

Speaker 1 ([19:43](#)):

Chasing turnover rather than profit is a thankless task. And I must confess, I have been a guilty participant on this ride too. Lisa's successful business story is what many entrepreneurs dream about. But as I mentioned in episode three of series one, life is a magnificent game of chance. Starting and growing any new venture takes huge effort, but with the highs come, the lows. Lisa has the past decade all been about success.

Speaker 2 ([20:16](#)):

It has not been a story of success along the way. This has been a roller coaster in every element. You know, roller coaster in terms of the business, but also on a personal level. If you're the sole business owner you know, an entrepreneur on your own, you are completely entwined with the business as is your personal life. So alongside the business I got married to my boyfriend from university. We had a daughter, and then two years ago. So back in 2019, we separated. And that year was the year that we were the least profitable and was the year that for me personally, everything fell apart. You know, my life fell apart and I had to still get up and run this business every day.

Speaker 1 ([21:12](#)):

What does it feel like to be the beating heart of a highly successful growing company, but know things are falling apart at home?

Speaker 2 ([21:21](#)):

One thing that I had never done prior to this point was to bring my personal life into work. I'd never cried at work. I'd never shown we have a close relationship. The people, you know, the team is Sew over It and myself, but I always kept some sort of distance of, you know, my emotional distance. I felt that I was there to be the rock. I was there to be the inspirational leader. I was there to, to drive this business and I needed to be seen in their eyes as this strong tenacious leader. That year I could not do that. And I remember the day that I went and spoke to our managing director and our head of content. And I said to them, both, this is happening. I'm not in a good place. I've been struggling for the past few months trying to hide this from you.

Speaker 2 ([22:13](#)):

But I can't, I know that the way that I have been running this business has not been the best because I've been so preoccupied, I'm not doing my job well, and I need your help. And we all sat around the three of us and cried. It was bless them. They cried for me, you know, they were, so I think moved by it that they said, thank you, Lisa, because actually at a time like that, you have to be honest. And I felt guilt that I wasn't doing my job properly. I felt guilt that I wasn't being a good mum to my daughter, had all of this guilt and, you know, everything was sort of running around my head. You know, I was like a headless chicken. I was just of in this bizarre, surreal time when it didn't feel like I was my usual focused self. And I genuinely, you know, it's, it's hard to admit it, but the business did suffer. I'm not going to say that everything that didn't go well with the business that year was because of what was happening in my personal life. But it definitely was a big factor.

Speaker 1 ([23:14](#)):

You opened up to colleagues and thus shared your vulnerability. This can't have been easy. And I imagine you played out the scenario in your head many times before you spoke to colleagues. Was their reaction what you expected?

Speaker 3 ([23:28](#)):

No, it wasn't what I expected at all. I think I thought that they wouldn't know what to do. I thought that they would be like, okay, you know, what are we going to do now? Who's going to be this, this, you know, this isn't, our boss is not who we thought we were, or I think, I didn't think at all. And actually what it did, that moment changed the way that I have run the business ever since, because I've realized that actually being this kind of super strong leader actually made me more unapproachable. And I think that they now feel, we share a lot more about the business and how it's going and, you know, we share, they now have come to me with issues that they have personally and feel that they can talk about that more openly. And I think that's really important because at the end of the day, you're spending more time with your colleagues than you are with most of the people in your personal life. And so actually, you know, if you have to only bring part of yourself to work every day, that that, that can be really tricky to do. And so we really have become a much stronger team as a result of me showing that vulnerable.

Speaker 1 ([24:45](#))

And obviously things changed in your personal life.

Speaker 2 ([24:48](#)):

Yeah, the only thing that was particularly tricky about all of this is that I, I'm not only the business owner, but I'm also the face of the brand. And so I had shared the fact that I'd got married and talked about my wedding dress. And I had shared the fact that I, you know, we did a maternity range when I was pregnant. And so for a few months, I remember when, how I'm going to tell people I'm going to have to tell people because I've let them in so far. I, can't not the other element. The other kind of difficulty was that I had also set up a second business based on the kind of personal brand of Lisa Comfort that had been an offshoot of Sew over It called Lisa Comfort Home, which was a homeware brand, still is a home where brand. And I based the launch of it around the renovation of mine and my husband's at the time, our dream home in London in Hackney.

Speaker 2 ([25:40](#)):

And I'd shared the whole process of this renovation and the before and afters and all of that. And then suddenly a year after we'd moved in or even less than that I had to then go, yeah, so I'm getting divorced and I have to sell this house and I'm going to have to move to another house. And, you know, that was incredibly difficult because I felt so vulnerable at that time. And I thought, gosh, I'm going to get people criticizing me for giving up on my marriage or whatever it was. You know, I had all these fears, but actually it was fine. You know, it was just another tricky thing that I had to do. And it was weirdly the making of Lisa Comfort Home because what I did is I moved. I now live in Walthamstow then, okay. It's not maybe such a big, big thing, you know, dream home. But what I did is I renovated that house without having to compromise on style or design in any way I made it purely me. And then the essence of that brand has come out so strongly. And it's, it's basically made that business. So in a bizarre way, it's, it's been a good thing for, for that business.

Speaker 1 ([26:52](#)):

You mentioned the guilt you felt, did you also feel you were failing yourself or others?

Speaker 3 ([27:00](#)):

Yeah, the failure was a very, very difficult thing for me, I think because I've been quite successful through my life, you know, successful at school, successful at university. I always got the jobs that I wanted to do, you know, everything had gone well for me, including the business, you know. I've been incredibly lucky at the success that I'd seen. You know, within four months of, of launching this business, I had a two book deal with one of the top publishers in the UK. I got featured in, you know, Vogue and Evening Standard and, and the Guardian and all these different, you know, I had all this wonderful success and the business had continued to grow and you know, it hadn't been the picnic. It had been a challenge, but there hadn't been any massive challenges and what I would say massive failures. And there I am in 2019 and I feel like I have let the team down.

Speaker 2 ([27:50](#)):

That's where I really feel. I've let them down, I've let them down. I've done my job badly. I'm now going to have to make people redundant, which is I had to do that. I did that to do that once before, but just one person I had to make a, you know, cut off a few legs of the business in order to save it. So I had to make people redundant and they also obviously had that personal failure that I'd failed my marriage. And I'd failed, you know, my, my daughter, you know, everything. So, but dealing with failure is part of life as I, you know, I know that, but actually going through that and, and, and again, it's just been something that's made me stronger because now I'm not scared of failing. I failed big and that's okay. You know, you always come out with a different perspective or you, you learned from it, you're stronger that as long as you can get through that failure. And as long as you can keep that tenacity and just keep on going, then, then, then it's always a positive

Speaker 1 ([28:54](#)):

Over the years, I've come to learn events often happen in threes. At the end of 2019 Lisa's marriage was over and her business was in difficulty, but like all of us, she had no idea a global pandemic was just around the corner. Fortunately Lisa had been savvy enough to diversify into the digital world. And as a result had opened up new markets, but she still had rent and rates to pay on two London shops. So what was your reaction, Lisa? To the announcement of the very first lockdown.

Speaker 3 ([29:28](#)):

Okay, here we go. Here we go. Again. I remember thinking I've been through such a difficult year, bring on something else. You know, it didn't really phase me and had the pandemic hit, you know, back in 2017 or 18, I think it would have been more of a shock, but I wasn't used to life being easy. Life was just one challenge after another. And so I sort of just took it in my stride, but I also, we had been again weirdly lucky and you would never think this at the time, but I sort of said that we had a really bad year financially in 2019. And I'd realized that the way that the business was going was not with the bricks and mortar store was not the physical classes they had started to not become as, as popular, they weren't as profitable. We had this big store in Islington at this point that had to be full of fabric all the time.

Speaker 2 ([30:20](#)):

And that was crippling our cash-flow. I had to have it manned by, you know, the staff so that we could keep it open the whole time and it just wasn't working. So I had to make quite a few people redundant and cutoff what I've, you know, say a lot of limbs and that what I'd done is I'd analyze the P and L I'd looked at the figures and I've gone, right? What are the most profitable parts of the business? And what are the parts of the business that are costing us so much? And also where is there an opportunity and the digitalization

of our business, which I started in 2016, which is basically making the patterns digital, launching this online platform, Stitch School, they were, you know, really the business was going. And so I'd made those decisions because I'd been pushed into a corner, not because I had sort of, it was part of my strategy. I was pushed into a corner and I had to do that to save the business. And so in January and February of 2020, we were still in a very bad way. You know, we had very little cash flow and savings to kind of get us through

Speaker 1 ([31:24](#)):

Out of interest. How many months of cash-flow did you have in the bank in January, 2020?

Speaker 2 ([31:30](#)):

I, so from January, 2020, and probably December, January and February, I had been living as though it was month to month. I didn't know if we would be continuing the following month. Every time payroll would come round at the end of the month, it would be so tight. I had, you know, normally I'd like to have three to four months cashflow to, to see us through. We didn't have that at all. We just had literally hand to mouth. It was literally that bad. I think we had 20,000 pounds as an overdraft, but that wouldn't have been enough to get us through one anyway,

Speaker 1 ([32:06](#)):

Personally, you're in a very difficult place. Your business is in real trouble and it's touch and go, whether you can save it. So what did you do?

Speaker 3 ([32:15](#)):

So actually, I hadn't moved into my house in Walthamstow at this point. In fact, I'd had to move out of the family home. We'd managed to sell that. And it, my, my place that I was buying him off and say it wasn't ready. So I had to move into my loft, a loft room at my friend's house with my daughter and in this loft room for, it was January and February. And then the pandemic hit. And I thought, well, I'm not going to do lockdown in here. You know, I love my friend dearly, but this is crazy. So I decided to go back up to Yorkshire to my parents and do lock down there. And her dad, my daughter's dad, said, that's the best place for her. You've got childcare, so you can, you know, work. And also she'll have more space up there and a bigger garden, et cetera.

Speaker 2 ([33:01](#)):

So that's what we did. And so we had moved up there and I, all my team, I was sort of very conscious that I couldn't ask my team at this point, no one was going into shops and spaces to run an e-commerce site. That was just not in the first lockdown. You weren't really allowed to do that. So I had gone, right, well, how am I going to keep, get, keep this business going. I need to have the online shop working because we sell fabric still. And so I got a man in a van. I feel, you know, I was, the girls, helped him fill up everything, printers, packaging, fabric, stock that we had. And he drove it all the way up from London to Yorkshire. And I turned my bedroom that I was staying in at my parents into our online shop processing space.

Speaker 2 ([33:47](#)):

And those three months when I look back at those three months and what I did, I actually can't quite believe it. But I used to every day I would do a live sew along at lunchtime and around that, I would be processing orders. So we had Rosie who is sort of a wing woman who runs the business from day to day. She had taken one element of the e-commerce site. We print our patterns on large scale printers for people

who want to do that. Otherwise they would go somewhere else to a printer. So we do that service for them. So she had taken one of the printers into her flat, and I had taken everything else. And yeah, the days were insane. We would, I'd get up. I'd obviously get Jasmine ready, mum. And dad would then take Jasmine for the morning and I would do some orders.

Speaker 2 (34:37):

Then at 12 we'd all have lunch. And then I would have a very short window where I'd have to get Jasmine down for her nap. And then at one o'clock I would go live and I would just have to pray that she would not wake up for her nap before two o'clock. Once or twice she did and came, came and asked to go to the toilet. But of course all the people watching thought it was very sweet, but still, but there was still that tension, like I've got, you know, got to do this. And then I would finish that. That was a time as well when I was doing this sew along that my parents had a break. Cause I know I didn't want them to, you know, they got a break from looking after Jasmine. And then after I finished that Jasmine would wake up mum and dad would take her for a few more hours. And then I would carry on doing the online shop. We then all stop for the briefing at five. And I remember that was a, a great time. Dad would bring a gin and tonic, and I remember I would be packaging orders whilst also watching the briefing on BBC. And then I'd stop, be with Jasmine, bath her, put her to bed and then carry on again. And I did that for three months,

Speaker 1 (35:40):

Average working day 14 hours?

Speaker 3 (35:43):

Yeah. I mean, there wasn't really anything else to do, but adrenaline got me through. But what it, what was amazing about that time is I felt this guilt in 2019 about how I'd let the business down, I'd taken my eye off the ball and I'd let the business down. And this was my opportunity to save the business personally. And I genuinely felt that the, I was like, Oh my goodness, I'm saving the business. I'm driving the sales by doing these sew alongs and I'm then processing the orders and I'm saving, saving the business. And we, I mean, obviously crafts did incredibly well in the pandemic and we've all seen a massive boom. And again, I would say we're very lucky in that regard, but it's not just been luck is because I pivoted the business. I did the sew alongs. I decided to get that man in a van come up to York and I worked my ass off for three months solidly and I saved the business. And this year has been the most profitable year.

Speaker 1 (36:48):

Lisa, thank you for telling your story, especially as so much of what you have shared is so close to your heart. Even though shops have had to close again, I sense a growing light at the end of the tunnel for you. How do you see the future for the business?

Speaker 2 (37:04):

We decided. So the shop space, we decided to, to leave that, in fact, what I've done, I couldn't get out of the lease. I've still got about 18 months left on the lease, but my other business is much more suited to a bricks and mortar business. So we've turned it into a homeware Lisa Comfort home, which has been open for about two weeks since we made that renovation. But we can run our e-commerce for Lisa Comfort home from there. And Sew over It's just moved into its own office and we've accepted that bricks and mortar physical classes is not the way forward for, Sew over It. Focusing on the digital products and the online learning is the way forward. And it's been very successful doing that.

Speaker 1 (37:43):

And through this most challenging of times, how would you describe your, your mental health and looking after yourself?

Speaker 2 (37:51):

It's very difficult when you're in it to realize that you're struggling. Because again, I think I had adrenaline and I had a sense of purpose. But I I've talked about in the past of suffering from anxiety. And I often have said that my anxiety is also the, that's the downside to one side of my personality, the upside to having that anxiety is that I have an immense drive. And I think it's kind of driven by the flip side of it. But and that's something that, you know, I've sort of, it's part of me, it's who I am, but I was obviously very aware that if I wasn't looking after myself, that that anxiety would become a problem and start to prevent me from being able to do what I'm doing. And I, I have, I was actually training for the marathon last year in a bizarre kind of, I wanted something to focus on when my, my, my, my life was falling apart in 2019. I decided to start running and then signed up for the marathon.

Speaker 2 (38:49):

And I was going to be running the marathon in 2020 for the charity 'Mind'. But when, obviously that all stopped I stopped my training and actually stopped running during that three month period because I was exhausted. And since then I've realized that running is my savior. And so I've started again because running helps keep my mental health in check. It gives me time and you know, it keeps my appetite up. So I'm eating well, all those sorts of things and, and, and, you know, makes me feel fit. And like I've got a lot more energy. But yeah, it's been, it's, it's been very challenging time, I think, for mental health for everybody. But I wouldn't say that yeah, I've suffered just as much. I think it's, you know, it's important to let people know that I haven't just flown through this and thought it was all wonderful. It's been, it's been very challenging

Speaker 1 (39:42):

And you've let us into your life. You've learned a lot and I'm delighted. You seem to be coming through even stronger and more capable. So what does the future hold for Lisa comfort?

Speaker 2 (39:53):

Well, last year on top of getting through a pandemic, I also got onto a course. I applied for in 2019, which is with Goldman Sachs. It was a business accelerator course focusing on entrepreneurs who have potentially high growth businesses. And it was insane. I'm not going to say it was easy. It was like a, an MBA squeezed into one into three months, but it was incredible because it allowed me to have some space and time to look at my business and at a time when it really needed to have a look and then kind of think about what I'm going to do with the business for the next few years. And so off the back of that, I was able to put together a really comprehensive 30 page business growth plan, which most businesses probably don't do once they've started. And so now I know what, where we're going.

Speaker 2 (40:43):

We want to continue with our digitalization and, and we really want to make sure that we're appealing to a wider audience. So getting even more people interested in sewing, going beyond our kind of majority of our customers are a certain age and female, and we want to kind of broaden that appeal. We also want to focus on moving into the U S and in a bigger way as well. And we have just, I've just hired my first senior leadership team. So by hire, I've sort of promoted some people and hired a couple of other people. So I

now have financial director, a brand and marketing director and a COO. And that has allowed me to be able to spend less time on the business and more time on strategy and the creative direction, which is ultimately my role so that I can keep us on track and drive forwards. And I feel more focused and more happy within the business. And I felt in a long, long time.

Speaker 1 ([41:44](#)):

Lisa, thank you so much for sharing your story on the startup survival podcast. I am sure you are and will continue to be an inspiration to thousands of people all over the world.

Speaker 2 ([41:57](#)):

Thank you for having me. It's been a pleasure

Speaker 1 ([42:03](#)):

Well, there you have it. It's rare for people running businesses, especially through these most difficult of times to be so open, candid and honest about their lives. Hopefully the truths that Lisa has shared will inform your thinking, your appreciation and your understanding of entrepreneurial life. Of what it takes to start of what it takes to grow of what it takes to survive. For me. One of the biggest takeaways is the reinforcement of a point made by Professor Andy Penaluna when he referenced Antonio Damasio's work in episode one. We are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think. Emotions run deep and influence just about everything we do when starting and running our own businesses. Therefore understanding how our mind works and how we make decisions can only help us get better and go further. And so my book recommendation for this episode is another New York Times bestseller.

Speaker 1 ([43:05](#)):

The book is how we decide by Jonah Lehrer. Read this fabulous text to understand the power of your own mind and exactly what is going on when decisions are being made. Starting and running a business can be very stressful and emotionally draining, especially when a pandemic is around. By reading Jonah's journey into the mind, you will be equipping yourself with a deeper understanding of emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and guilt, and be able to separate and understand emotional and rational thinking. And as a result, you will be better prepared and able to make decisions that are good for you and your business.

Speaker 1 ([43:51](#)):

Well, the sun is beginning to set on this episode, but before we close, let's hear it for my very special guest. Lisa, thank you so much, Lisa, for your openness, bravery and contagious inspiration people like you make the world a better place.

And I must salute by producer Duncan, Bennett's researcher, Chris Jackson, and the sponsors Seejam moths for the music. Thank you one and all. And let's not forget the support from LSC Generate within the London School of Economics, as well as the SimVenture team who allow me time out to do this. In the next episode, which will be published on Thursday, the 11th of March. I'm going to be exploring the topic of how to build a website that your customers love to visit and use. Be prepared for more story stuff. And you'll also be meeting a special entrepreneur whose website visitor numbers are, what startup dreams are made of. Meanwhile, your podcast feedback is not just welcomed. It's needed. Share what you really like. And let me know the truth about what needs to be improved. And of course, whatever you're listening channel of preference, don't forget to rate, review and subscribe. Until next time. My name's Peter Harrington, and this has been your startup survival podcast. Go well, stay safe and thank you.

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