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presents

May 2019

NETWORKING AS™ ENTREPRENEURSHIP

by Megan Burke Roudebush

with

Sid Bala, Keisha Smith-Jeremie and featuring keepwith's Shark Tank
audition experience

alligatortek

sanaia
APPLE SAUCE

This edition of Networking As™ focuses on Networking As™ Entrepreneurship: the importance of relationship building to entrepreneurship and the critical role that strong and supportive networks play in entrepreneurs' success. We spoke to Sid Bala, President & CEO, alligatortek, about his journey to becoming an entrepreneur, the joy he finds in connecting others for the right reasons, and how his involvement in groundbreaking civic organizations has supported his path. We also spoke to Keisha Smith-Jeremie, Chief People Officer at Tory Burch and Founder and CEO of sanaia, a coveted apple sauce brand. Like Sid's, Keisha's entrepreneurial journey is unique and relationships have played a pivotal role at every step of her experience. How keepwith came to know Keisha is itself an epic networking story. Also in this edition of Networking As are snippets of the exciting story of how keepwith's Founder Megan Burke Roudebush came to audition for the television show Shark Tank and how so many members of her network stepped it up to help her in what was a less than 24-hour timeframe to prepare for the audition.

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NETWORKING AS™ ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There are certain conversations in life that you know have made a significant impact. My conversation with Sid Bala for this piece was one of those conversations. I sat down with Sid recently for this article and I am sure glad that I did. As we discussed his entrepreneurial journey and how strategic networking relationships and practices have supported him along the way, Sid shared how he first became an entrepreneur, his methodical approach to networking and why networking and entrepreneurship are integrally linked. What really stood out from this discussion was a message that truly explains why keepwith exists as a company: networking well requires deliberate, thoughtful and well-timed strategy.



Sid Bala

President & CEO, alligatortek



Sid Bala drives the vision and direction of an award-winning software firm dedicated to solving business challenges with technology. alligatortek was established in 1993 to build custom enterprise applications for the web and mobile devices. These solutions address process bottlenecks to improve efficiency, productivity, and the bottom line for clients. alligatortek opens the possibilities for new strategies and business opportunities with software technologies.

Networking Defined

MBR: As a successful entrepreneur, civic leader in Chicago and start-up founder, how do you define networking?

SB: Networking is the opportunity to connect with others...and sow the seeds for a relationship. I see networking as the beginning of two individuals coming together or a group of individuals that have the ability to inform a more meaningful connection and that connection can lead to a relationship.

The Networking/Entrepreneurship Link

MBR: When you hear the term Networking As Entrepreneurship, what does that evoke for you? (In other words; how has strategic relationship building informed your entrepreneurial journey?)

SB: As an entrepreneur, I am continually looking to advance an agenda that I have around building meaningful long-lasting companies, both for me and for others...so as I look at how I can help others build entities or organizations of scale, I recognize how important the lattice behind those organizations is: the lattice of relationships.

SB: Networking as Entrepreneurship is networking as a builder; networking as a builder is about what kind of connections are you creating that can build organizations and make the world a better place.



Sid recently wrote an article entitled The Value of a Connector. Here were some of keepwith's key takeaways:

1. "The value of being a connector is immeasurable."
2. "As with athletics, the sport of connecting requires proper follow-through. It is incumbent upon the connector to follow-up and ensure that the tribe is connected."
3. "Establishing a real link between two people...starts with taking a genuine interest in the other person. Who are they and with whom do they want to connect? What types of people are they looking to include in their lives? Who could they meet that would enrich their lives beyond the connections they already have?"

Personal Approach to Networking

MBR: How would you describe your personal approach to networking?

SB: I think of networking as an iterative process. It starts with connecting and then finding the opportunity to build a relationship. For me, that means [asking] "how can I add value to the other individual with whom I am connecting?" I am looking to understand their situation. It is all about them. As I understand their situation, I can think of who I know of value that I can connect them with. Networking is the opportunity to connect that person with another person in my world. I ask---"Is it going to offer value? Is 1+1 making 11?...If not, no value. For me, personally, having been an entrepreneur for 26 years, relationships are the only real currency I have at the end of the day.

It may be the two people I am connecting may not click with one another and that is fine; I never expect or put external expectations that it has to work out. You simply put it out there and let it play. There is a concept of "unique ability"---that which you are really good at doing that you are excited to do...and at the end of the day, you have more energy from having done it than when you started. For me, the opportunity to be a connector is that. And networking is a means to allowing me to be a better connector.



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Sid Bala

Entrepreneurial Journey

MBR: Can you please describe for readers your entrepreneurial journey?

SB: I have been an entrepreneur for 26 years. My entrepreneurial journey started with my father. As a young person, I did not understand or appreciate what it means to be a Founder. My dad, on the other hand worked for corporate America his whole life. He knew that being a founder had so much more opportunity. He challenged me to start as an entrepreneur in my early 20s and to buck the system and not engage in Corporate America but rather as an entrepreneur. While I went to the best schools and had all the pedigree to join a nice corporate job, I started as an entrepreneur. The upside to this was I was not rooted in a corporation that would prevent me from venturing out. The flip side is that when I ventured out, I knew nothing and nobody and I did not have a sound thesis, except I was young and hungry and ready to do whatever.

SB: I had to learn from others and be a student. The best way was to network with others and learn from their experiences. Networking started as a means of survival, because I did not have a business. I started out of a bedroom. I needed to meet other people if I was going to further my lot in life. Through the years, I started building a company... alligatortek---the same company I have run for 26 years. I have gone through four iterations: Version 1.0, Version 2.0, Version 3.0 and Version 4.0.

SB: Version 1.0 was a twelve year journey. [It started out as] A network of individuals; not an employee/employer organization. During Version 2.0, the next 6 years, I had employees, but those were transactional employees. There was no common theme. For the last 8 years, we have lived out Version 3.0. We went ahead and built something of scale, based on meaningful connections with our employees, networking not only on the outside but inside the company as well. In 3.0, we built a mission and vision and core values that we could all band around.

SB: Now we are starting Version 4.0. [I am asking myself] How do I take my entrepreneurial journey to the next level; trying to seed a small company within a big company ----it is very easy to fall prey to being a mature company and then not necessarily exploring new entrepreneurial ideas to build. I know that in my journey, I have come at times to get complacent or feel like complacency could set in.

The only way to counter complacency is to embrace a new bold idea and look at how that idea could transform the company. By transforming the company I transform myself because I need to be a different person to make that happen. How can we embrace technology and business patterns out there today to come up with the next basis for a new company? Version 4.0 is a new birth for alligatortek.

Networking Advice for New Start-Up Founders

MBR: What networking advice would you give to a new start-up founder just getting an idea off the ground, when it comes to networking?

Networking is the basis of sowing seeds to connect; to connect to build relationships. The best way I could build a relationship with you would be if I could connect you with someone else and could add value to both you and the other entrepreneur. By translation, since I helped connect the two of you, you are both stronger and better. I am very intentional about thinking about who in my sphere of influence it would be good for you to know. Not always a person. May be a good idea.

It is great for start-up founders to be curious and to be ready to explore new people that you can meet; but I would challenge everyone to think about the quality of those connections....not the quality of the people...the ability to make a few solid connections that you can further...we have all seen large networking events where you have speed dating...this is a rapid fire way to meet a number of people in a short period of time. While this has the benefit of expanding your network more quickly, it does not result in sustainable meaningful relationships. I challenge people to think about whether they are networking with purpose. My purpose is the question "am I adding value to the other person? Did I, by networking with that individual, add value to their day?" If I can say yes, my energy comes from knowing that I helped do that. I am very intentional about connecting with others and I am very intentional about not looking for value myself. Networking is a selfless act that, when done properly, can pay great rewards. The energy that I draw from having seen that connection happen is pretty amazing.

NETWORKING AS™ ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The story of how keepwith came to meet Keisha Smith-Jeremie is in itself a story for the networking history books. Several months ago, I was watching an episode of Shark Tank--and on an episode, I was stopped in my tracks when I heard the founder of an adult apple sauce company, Keisha Smith-Jeremie, start talking. Mesmerized by her message and the power with which she answered the sharks' pointed questions, I found myself shouting "yes" at the television in agreement with her points. Shortly thereafter, keepwith hired a graphic designer to help with our website and low and behold, Keisha Smith-Jeremie ("the apple sauce lady") was also the designer's client. An introduction was made and the rest is history. keepwith now feels honored to consider Keisha one of the company's key outside supporters.



Keisha Smith-Jeremie

Founder and CEO, sanaia



Keisha Smith-Jeremie is the founder and CEO of sanaia, a coveted applesauce brand. Capitalizing on trends such as the plant-based movement and the reimagination of childhood treats for adults, the sanaia brand has the makings of a household name. Keisha was the first to recognize that there were millions of apple sauce-loving adults who were being completely ignored by the sector, and so she developed sanaia specifically with those adult taste buds and consumption habits in mind. While running her company and appearing recently on Shark Tank, Keisha also has a very big day job: she is Chief People Officer at Tory Burch.

How do you define networking?

MBR: As a successful HR leader and start-up founder, how do you define networking?

KSJ: My relationship with that word has evolved. I am an introvert and so networking is a word I had been allergic to for a long time. As I have grown in my professional career and now particularly as an entrepreneur, it is clear to me that one of the differentiating factors between professionals and entrepreneurs who are successful is how resourceful they can be. It is not about knowing all the answers, but having access to the people who have answers... I have grown to have a very deep appreciation for the way that having a robust network can accelerate both your professional career and the growth of your business. My network, having developed it over 20+ years, is the single contributing factor to sanaia's growth.

The Networking/Entrepreneurship Link

MBR: When you hear the term Networking As Entrepreneurship, what does that evoke for you?

KSJ: If I look back at sanaia and any of our big wins (i.e., finding the President of my organization; getting on 810 shelves of Walmart this summer; upgrading our e-commerce site to handle Shark Tank traffic in less than 2 weeks) all three have been game changing milestones for the company and in each case, I was able to achieve the win through a series of seemingly unconnected random conversations in my network that led me to the right place, the right time, and the right connection.



Networking as an Introvert

MBR: At keepwith, we hear a lot of people discuss how their introvert/extrovert tendencies inform their approach to networking. You mentioned being an introvert. How does being an introvert inform your approach to networking?

KSJ: As an introvert, I find the idea of networking in the more traditional sense (going to events after work) is not only terrifying but also the last thing on my list of things that I want to do. In my job, I have to be in those rooms. My approach is to go deep with one or two people, as opposed to feeling the need to work the room. This serves you better, because you are more memorable, and you have more rich content to return to the conversation if you need to make an ask or deepen the connection in the future.

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Keisha Smith-Jeremie

Entrepreneurial Journey

MBR: Can you please describe for readers your entrepreneurial journey?

KSJ: That starts with me feeling like I could see an opportunity to create a billion dollar company. I am not somebody who had an entrepreneurial bug. I am not someone who was always looking for an exit strategy....I have always been beyond satisfied in my career. My best and highest purpose is enabling leaders to actualize their vision. When I made the connection between the impact that Chobani had on the yogurt category; the introduction of innovation and the focus on what adults want and how they re-imagined that product [yogurt] to be focused on a modern contemporary adult; they took a category from \$8 billion to \$125 billion category. The yogurt shelf today has exploded with variety because of Chobani entering a market.

KSJ: Having been an apple sauce lover and someone making it a certain way since college, I had an aha moment- what if there was a different kind of re-imagined apple sauce that was attractive for adults and curated for them; particularly at a time when everyone is focused on plant based diets...I felt like I saw a bunch of different indicators of hugely disruptive potential...a category that is sleepy...decidedly focused on kids and the elderly...I saw a wide open market where nobody is paying attention to adults who love apple sauce. Given how much I love apple sauce, if I didn't do this, I would regret it for the rest of my life. It is the idea that would not leave me alone.



Inspiration In Her Wallet

MBR: What else would you like readers to know about you, sanaia, networking, entrepreneurship, or anything else?

KSJ: As entrepreneurs, we re-imagine products from our unique perspective and experiences. I have in my wallet a picture---the cover of Fast Company---with the CEO of Chobani, Hamdi Ulukaya, on the cover...I have this in my wallet and put it there in July of 2017 when I launched; that is when it came across my radar...and the picture is striking; his entire journey---highs and lows and the improbable idea of launching Chobani.

KSJ: I carry this in my wallet because he is a household name. No part of his story seemed probable. He is an immigrant, not from a CEO background...He was not a chef...There are so many parallels between his life and my life; I love his story because it reminds me of the fact that 90% of this journey is going to be filled with uncertainty. As an entrepreneur, it is what you sign up for. Days on end when you don't have the answer and you are not sure how you will find it. You don't have the money; you don't have the resources. The journey is filled with uncertainty, but if you have the belief in an idea or a product...you are able to see something the world isn't seeing. This lane is all about that. Being relentless and unapologetic about being able to reimagine the world. I am re-imagining apple sauce for everybody, but my bigger ambition it to amplify the fact that we all have the ability to re-imagine the world around us.

KSJ: I keep this in my wallet for a host of reasons. I am proud to look forward to the moment...when my goddaughter Nya Sanai, a ten-year old little girl of color (sanaia is a riff on her first and middle name)— sees her name on shelves in Walmart and Whole Foods and Kroger; on apple sauce that has flavors that are unapologetically Carribean.

Your entrepreneurial experience will help you to re-imagine whatever product you come up with in your image, your experiences, your perspective. I am excited about having my story propel someone else to re-imagine the world around them. Apple sauce is apple sauce. Some would say that it has already been done, but nobody else thought about the millions of adults that still love apple sauce and I am thrilled to be leading the way.

NETWORKING AS™ ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Certain moments in a company's history represent pivot points in the company's trajectory. These moments become bolded dots on the timeline of the company's journey. On March 20, 2019, keepwith experienced one of those moments when we were asked to audition for Shark Tank, the hit television show on which start-up founders have the opportunity to pitch to world renowned investors. The kicker: there were fewer than 24-hours between when we applied to audition and when the audition took place. This section of Networking as Entrepreneurship will share with you what those 24 hours were like. Throughout it all, one thing is clear: keepwith would not have been prepared to pitch if it was not for several members of our network and several strangers who stepped up to support us. We extend our sincerest thanks to all who did.



March 21- 5am: Hair and Make-Up. After staying up all night writing my 90-second pitch, I was up early for hair and make-up. My good friend Kaili Kaminski introduced me to the wonderful Keith Ward of Keith Ward Beauty. With less than a day's notice, Keith was at my home at 5am to make sure I looked great for the audition. Bonus: he taught me not to wear my audition outfit first thing in the morning, because it would wrinkle by the time of my audition. #learningallthetime.

March 21-10am-2pm: My war room. This is the working cubby at the Fed-Ex/Kinkos that was closest to the audition site. Here I refined my pitch, said my pitch out loud repeatedly and called friends to hear me practice my pitch. From here, I also called my friend Amy Long, a finance and operations expert, to confirm my requested amount of funding and my estimated valuation. Amy saved the day, since everyone knows you must KNOW YOUR NUMBERS when you appear on Shark Tank.



March 21-10am-2pm: The Amazing Fed-Ex Kinkos team who helped me. From the moment I walked in the door, this team noticed me, asked me what I was doing (the make-up gave it away), got excited about Shark Tank and got to work helping me. From printing my pitch deck (and catching and fixing a typo), to offering to hear my pitch and even offering to bring me a sandwich, the team at the Fed Ex at 1720 N Harlem Ave, Elmwood Park, IL 60707 rocked. Thanks, guys!

March 21-2:30pm: THE PITCH!!! When it was time, I walked into the audition room, volunteered to go next and pitched keepwith to one of Shark Tank's producers. She asked a few questions. I handed her a copy of our pitch deck and she told me she had everything she needed. Regardless of the outcome (we do not yet know if we were selected), the experience of this 24-hour whirlwind was life changing. The most important thing I have taken away is deep gratitude for the people in my life.



As we think about the connection between networking and entrepreneurship, here are four things to consider:

1. Always be ready for anything. You never know when you might have a life-changing opportunity the next day.
2. Tap your tribe. You may not know the answers, but you likely know the people who do. Reach out to them!
3. Think on your feet. If something comes up that seems like it might not be possible, think quickly about how you can make it happen. Then go make it happen.
4. Be open to help from others. We all like to think that we can do everything ourselves, but we cannot. Let people help you and then be exceedingly and sincerely grateful for that help. Most importantly, pay forward the willingness to help others.

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NETWORKING AS™ ENTREPRENEURSHIP

At keepwith we know the importance of having a strong network. We also know that this is particularly critical for entrepreneurs. Whether an entrepreneur is kicking around a new idea, looking for an expert, looking to meet or introduce someone, looking to learn more about something, or just looking to connect with others during what can sometimes be very isolating work, it is critical that entrepreneurs spend some of their ever valuable and ever limited time cultivating the relationships that matter most within their networks. When we think of entrepreneurs who exemplify these concepts, we automatically think of Sid Bala and Keisha Smith-Jeremie.



About

Networking As™

Networking As™ is a recurring series of articles, blog posts and videos highlighting how networking is integral to a particular topic (for example, Networking As™ Wellness). Networking As™ publications may be accompanied by in-real-life networking events. Future issues will include Networking As™ Mentorship, Networking As™ Business Development, Networking As™ Parenting, Networking As™ Meatballs and Networking As™ Global Assignment, among others.

Have an idea for a future Networking As™ publication? E-mail megan@keepwith.com

Why

Entrepreneurship

At keepwith, we see the interplay between networking and entrepreneurship every day. The impact of relationships on entrepreneurs' journeys to business success is abundantly clear. We know that keepwith could not gain traction at the rate at which we are growing without the support of the amazing people in our network that want to see this company succeed. From building out our Asia Tour to figuring out whom to have build our website, as an entrepreneur of a company that is growing rapidly, I rely on my network and on prudently executed networking strategies every day.

About

keepwith®

We are a company that teaches people how to network well. We provide tailored advice and education that empowers people to form relationships that matter. Said more simply: we teach networking.

Founder Megan Burke Roudebush values authentic relationship building above all else. From New York City and now based outside Chicago, she enjoys volunteering, mentoring and most of all, networking well.



Megan Burke
Roudebush

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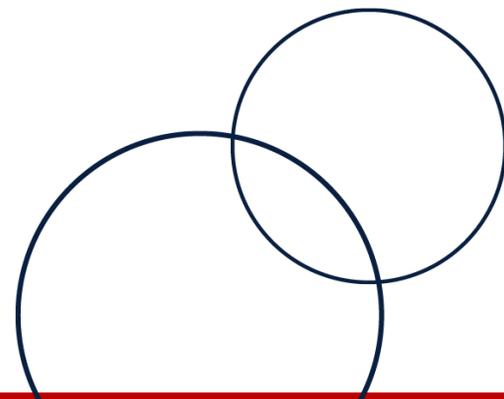
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Please contact Megan Roudebush (megan@keepwith.com) to schedule a brainstorming call to figure out how we can help.



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