



Business Unusual Podcast · Transcript: Episode 3 · 21/07/2020

Our Parks - The unusual business of getting fit for free

CLAUDIA:

Hello, I'm Claudia Winkleman, and a huge welcome to Business Unusual. This is a podcast all about entrepreneurs who are doing things differently. And it's made in association with the lovely people at Vodafone Business. In this episode, we're going to hear about challenging the status quo in the fitness industry with my guest Born Barikor. Born is the founder of Our Parks, a community of over 150,000 people who are getting fit totally for free, thanks to the exercise classes his business provides. He's here with me now to tell us all about it. Huge welcome to the podcast Born, thank you so much for joining us.

BORN:

Oh, thank you so much for having me on the show.

CLAUDIA:

And I love your website. It says that you are - and you are - a 'multi-award winning'... you've won so many awards, which we'll discuss in a minute... 'sports industry entrepreneur, battle rapper, radio producer, DJ grime, pharmaceutical science graduate, and a former 'Community Development Officer.' I mean, you might be 138 to have got all of that in! Is there anything I've missed?

BORN:

No. Oh, thank you so much. It's been, it's been, a busy six years let's say. I mean they all still fit on one page on my CV. So I'm really good there.

CLAUDIA:

You're good there. How did you come up with the idea of Our Parks and tell the listeners, if they don't know, what it is. Tell us all about it.

BORN:

Our Parks was born in 2014. It was based on the concept that I feel in London, you are never a mile away from a park, so everyone should have access to high quality exercise. And it really... I really stumbled on it because I was working as a community sports officer at the time for a leisure centre. And I was tasked with getting people who are inactive from hard to reach communities to take part in exercise in the gym. And at the time, I couldn't afford to take part in the gym exercise myself. And it says there's something fundamentally wrong here, where we have all these people that are inactive but we have all these parks and open spaces. And my mum was really kind of a building block for Our Parks. Because she had to get fit, so she went to the park and ran around the park. And she came back and said to me, "Look, there's so many people outside who want to exercise, but they give up because they have no guidance and no, like, no one to set their goals and give them some targets." And then I kind of sat back and I said to myself, "What can... what could I do?" as me being an ex-sportsman, knowing the power of fantastic coaching. And then I decided that we need to change the way in which we deliver exercise and make it accessible, and decide to disrupt the market by making exercise free and affordable, and that's how Our Parks was born.

CLAUDIA:

It's such an extraordinary idea, the more I've read about it and the more I've looked into it, the more I've seen how many people love it. The idea that... because you're right, even if you have the best intentions you know what I mean? I mean, you have granola for breakfast you go "I'm going to the park". If you're by yourself, you can give up after five minutes! How did you then persuade councils to invest in Our Parks for their local area? How did you pitch it? Because it must have been hard to go "look, we're gonna do this and we're doing it for free..."

BORN:

Yeah, yeah. With innovation, you kind of have to have something called 'innovation accounting', something that can account for the idea, or the service or the product you're about to deliver. We pitched first in Waltham Forest, who are the founding Our Parks borough. And the idea was, I said "if we can show the impacts of exercise, whether it's through health or social mobility, on the areas in which we deliver, we can show the cost saved on social return on exercise." So

we...we came up with this whole model saying “okay, for every pound you put in, we will save you X amount of pounds based on social isolation, obesity, diabetes, all the associated health, or even social concerns, we have of being inactive and being alone.”

CLAUDIA:

Absolutely. And when you say it like that, of course I imagine, not that it was easy, but the minute I hear you speak like that you go, “this is just a no brainer.” And did all the councils agree with you? Did they go “yes, we’re in!”. Or was it harder than that?

BORN:

It's always hard. It's always hard to convince anyone of an idea that doesn't exist. So when you...when you're doing something that no one can even think about. I mean, can you imagine saying, when I said “I'm going to leave work to set up an exercise programme, that will be free for people to access but we'll still pay coaches, the same or more than you get paid in the gym.” Everyone just laughed at you because it's kind of something they're not used to seeing. And you almost have to convince yourself that you're skating towards the future. And a lot of organisations and a lot of kind of companies exist in the now. Whereas we're really thinking what's going to be happening five years down the line, and where we are now is just, we've planned ‘now’ five years ago. So the biggest barrier, I'd say, was having the confidence to take that leap of faith and, and then being able to realise how to navigate your ship, when it doesn't go according to plan.

CLAUDIA:

Of course, but how difficult to stay focused because I imagine you're out for drinks with friends or, like you say, you tell your old employer, if lots of people go “What?! Don't be ridiculous Born, that's never gonna work.” You have to have some real inner strength to go. “No, I'm going to continue.” And was that - you mentioned your mum - did you need certain people behind you going? “No, just keep going.”

BORN:

Yeah, and I'm very fortunate. My wife also runs her own online art gallery and she was one of the first, well she was the first to sell online art. So as entrepreneurs, we have always had a moment at home where we're churning out ideas and thinking through the ‘build, measure, learn’ feedback loop. So I was quite fortunate, I had the support of my family who could see the

vision. But then it's also, it's just really being able to account for what you're going to be doing. So that's - I mentioned earlier, innovation accounting - so how can you look at your idea or innovation, and you won't get money from the bank because they can't say, "yeah, we understand. Let me give you some money because it's the same model as dry cleaners." The model doesn't exist. So I knew that I had, I really had to think about how I can track, week in, daily, the impact of the idea on the direction in which we want to travel. And I think kind of when I say that, it's easy to say, but when I talked to lots of new entrepreneurs, and it's almost if you don't have a map or even a, a structure to where you're going. And you're just doing, "I'm going to go out and see what happens." You're always guaranteed to see what happens. But you won't guarantee to make a success of what you're trying to achieve. And I think that's the most important thing with driving forward. And we've done so many different innovations within the one iteration of Our Parks. And every year we continue to thrive.

CLAUDIA:

Born, you mentioned, I think it was, a 'build measure learn' loop? Can you just explain that to an idiot like me, please?

BORN:

Yeah, so the 'build, measure, learn' feedback loop, in a way it's lean manufacturing. So the idea is, if you can be lean as possible, and doing MVP, which is your minimum viable product. So what's the minimum you can do to test your hypothesis on your product or service, and you use a 'build, measure, learn' feedback loop so it means with Our Parks we will build the minimum we needed, which was bookings and coaches and finding the classes, would measure it for how many people book on how people find the classes, and then the learn is what you do from that. Build, measure, learn feedback loop to change and to build, measure, learn again. So great businesses are continuously doing a build, measure, learn build.

CLAUDIA:

So you never you basically never sit on your laurels? You're constantly looking for feedback, looking to learn, then you build yourself up again.

BORN:

Yeah, and the quickest....so the quicker you can get through that feedback loop, the more successful you will be.

CLAUDIA:

Absolutely brilliant. Can you describe the business growth over the last six years, please? And were there moments where you went, “oh, we're on to a winner” and other moments when you were like “I'm not sure”? Talk us through the last six years.

BORN:

This is one of the moments I'll always remember... the first, second and third time I tried to go into a park and get people fit and working out and no one turned up and it was raining and I was almost like “what I have done?!” I'd remortgaged the house and this has to work and that's a make or break moment. And many people will say okay, “what I'm going to do is I'll go find some other work and to kind of do it on the side.” And I knew that I couldn't do this on the side, it had to be all in. Because when you do, when it becomes a hobby, it doesn't work. It will just be a hobby that will float along. And we're throwing up some big numbers now. So we, in the first year we were up, I think it was 2000. We got to 2000 by the end of the first year. But we really...like it went from two, three people, four people, groups of 30 and all we kept doing was “How did you find about it? And what can we do to improve?” We did coffee mornings, we spoke to the, to the parkers (we call our users Parker's) We even said “What would you like to be called?” and they came up with the word Parkers. So suddenly, what we started to do was start to build this brand within the brand. And we say, we wanted not to matter to Parkers on service, but we want it to matter on being a part of their life. Because when you only matter on service, what will happen is one day a coach will be late one day you have to cancel the class. And if that's them staying with you and leaving you, they will leave so it's like mattering on taste with a drink or something. You will always go to the next thing that tastes best. But what we decided to do was build a culture of Parkers that mattered on a level, which is far over the service. It was part of their life. They will walk around wearing their t-shirts, even if not going to exercise classes and they'd be proud to call themselves a Waltham Forest Parker and then suddenly, we started seeing numbers we started getting intel for councils. It was, it was the Parkers that led this whole kind of evangelist of being a Parker to make sure we could get everywhere telling our friends in other boroughs. And then year on year, we started to see the numbers growing.

CLAUDIA:

Yeah. So in essence you created a community, didn't you? I mean, they feel proud. I love the fact that they're proud to be Parkers and they wear t-shirts. And also word of mouth is everything, I imagine, for Our Parks.

BORN:

Yeah, the word of mouth coefficient is every one Parker brings three Parkers with them. And that's what we focused on. We focus on how can we get every Parker to refer a friend or bring another two partners with them? And I mean, as a business and many businesses that want to go viral... if you can focus on your viral coefficient, you can then exceed because like we say, your paid marketing, all that kind of stuff works really well to give you a jumpstart growth, but once the money runs out if you don't have a strategy, or even just a culture of being able to refer people, you almost could kind of flatline. So everything we do is geared around, you come to a session, you tell someone else, you bring someone else. And suddenly we started to see the numbers. Because we didn't have money to do marketing. All we had was money to deliver the sessions because it's free for the Parkers, and we spent all our resources into paying coaches and getting Parkers there.

CLAUDIA:

Are you naturally tech savvy? I mean, you must be because of all the other extraordinary things you've done. How important is technology to the business, if you like?

BORN:

It is incredibly important. I said when I set up Our Parks, I would never be in a park with a clipboard, trying to write someone's name down as a register. The days of manual registers - I said I said six years ago, and I know there's still people that use them - but for me, the only way to grow was to be able to mine data and, and make it as efficient as possible. So, we are really a data driven company, we collect the baseline data of all our Parkers they sign on, they book into every session, they're clicked in. So we know everything about our population. We know how many times they're going to sessions, where they're coming from, what's the background, but also we have a happiness rating. So we, we asked them to rate their happiness at the beginning.

CLAUDIA: That's brilliant.

BORN:

And then we can survey them and say, later on, "has your happiness improved, because you do yoga every Saturday?" I believe people don't know what they want, but they know how to behave in a way in which they want to behave. So as long as you can capture how they're behaving, you can almost give them what they want.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN:

And that was what I said at the start of setting up, it's not only an exercise programme which is going to be inclusive, fun, building communities, but it's going to do something which is mine data to show our funders the value of the product and service that we deliver.

CLAUDIA:

Do you do different classes? You mentioned yoga, just do you mind just telling me a few of the services that you do?

BORN:

Yeah, certainly So, so Our Parks delivers online and physical classes in the park now. In the park, we do everything from boot camp to yoga to hula hooping, to mums and buggy exercise, we pretty much do everything we've been...

CLAUDIA:

Every kind of workout.

BORN:

Every kind of workout. We did a class called grime yoga to target people on the estates and we will go in, make a class, we look at the demographic and we make a class to target the area in which we're trying to attract to be active. So there's not a there's not a 'out the box this is what we do.' We do, we do many things. We know things that do work, obviously from the data we have but come to Our Parks, sign up, you can take part and it's free. And we have an online offer as well, so if we're not in your area, there's an online offer where you can take part in at least five daily free home workouts as well

CLAUDIA:

You mentioned home workouts. Did that happen because of COVID-19? How has Our Parks been affected by the outbreak?

BORN:

Yeah, so since COVID-19, 24 hours after lockdown was announced we went Our Parks Live all online. That's we, yeah, we was up all night, we decided that we can't let the population of Parkers down and went online. We are the biggest free online.... We give seven classes a day now for free to our Parkers. But the beauty of what we did, we not only went online and used streaming platforms, we tracked what we did. So we didn't go "Okay, let's go online and do lots of Facebook Live and Instagram." We said "No, we're going to build the platforms, so you still have to sign up, still have to book into a class." So we could see what the Parkers like and how they behave. So it's all back to that mining process. And whatever we do, we're trying to think about the future and see, based on the behaviour, how to behave now, how can we predict behaviour in the future to keep them fit and healthy,

CLAUDIA:

And also you're listening to them. So you're finding out the information. I mean, I'll be honest, I've occasionally clicked on a live exercise thing on Instagram but haven't moved. I've just sat there watching and ... literally eating a bag of crisps. So at least you can see people, they can tell you if they liked it and how they felt about it. When lock down eases, it's slowly starting to ease, do you think you'll continue to do online classes or for you is it about getting people out in the oxygen as well?

BORN:

Hundred percent we'll continue with online classes and it will run alongside the physical classes. With online classes, we're seeing Parker's who didn't put the cameras on at the beginning and now they've got the cameras on. They're having birthday parties in, in the session, people making virtual cards for each other. So even though they're not physically with each other they are because they can talk and have that time online. So we will still continue to deliver that.

CLAUDIA:

You must be incredibly proud of what you've done when you when you, when you look at those communities?

BORN:

Yeah, I am. I'm proud of all what the Parkers are achieving. I've seen Parker's come in with low confidence, never exercise or haven't exercised for long periods of time, come in and run marathons or become coaches and meet people. We've had people that live next door to each other and haven't spoken to each other ever. And suddenly they're coming together to an exercise class. And for some reason, when you're not inside a gym and you're on your treadmill, you can talk to the person next to you. You can, you can hold the boxing pads and suddenly you become friends and the kids play and you go on holidays together. We had Parkers go skiing for the first time because they met at a class and one of the Parkers said "let's try skiing". So it's amazing when I want to look at it. But then there's another side of me that says we only have 150,000 people and there's so many more people we need to be reaching. So I kind of, I know that even now I'm proud of all the Parkers. I want more people, more Parkers to experience this because of inactivity level levels across the UK, we can help contribute to making people active.

CLAUDIA:

With online workouts, OurParks has done an excellent job of pivoting from a face-to-face business, to one that provides its services online. If you run a small or medium business, it's likely you have also had to make big changes to the way you work. Let me tell you about a new free offering from Vodafone that will help your business to become more digital, resilient and future ready. Vodafone are committed to supporting your business as you adjust to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. That's why they have launched V-Hub by Vodafone Business.

V-Hub provides digital business insight, one-to-one support and a wealth of information – all in one place. It's packed with resources that will help you get more out of technology, boost your digital knowhow and prepare your business for a new, post-Covid, way of working. With V-Hub you can get one-to-one support from Vodafone's advisors and discuss all sorts of digital topics – from remote working to cyber security, over the phone or on web chat. You can access a knowledge centre that's packed with content to help you with everything from setting up a website or online shop, to tips on improving your digital marketing. What's more, coming soon will be podcasts, videos and informative webinars. So keep checking back for new content. All this great stuff can be accessed via a simple, interactive hub at www.vodafone.co.uk/business/vhub V-Hub by Vodafone Business is available for free for a

limited period only. So, take a look today and see how your business could benefit from all the useful resources on offer. Keep Connecting, with Vodafone.

CLAUDIA:

You've talked a lot about this wonderful community of Parkers. But I imagine you also have to bring in and sort of create a community of instructors too? How are you able to do that? Because when you went to them you must have been like "ok we'll pay you, but here's how it's going to work - the people who are working out are not going to pay you." Were they slightly confused? And once they're in, have they stayed with you along the journey?

BORN:

Yeah, so this is one of the most exciting parts of building Our Parks, was the coach journey. So at the beginning, I was scrambling, I was trying to get coaches. I was like "Oh, who do I know?" Trying to get as many people in as possible, and then something happened. We were running a good forty odd sessions in Waltham Forest at the time and I started seeing coaches who... well, we just call it 'the magic'... that had this 'magic' which kept people and Parker's coming back, kept growing numbers. And then I saw coaches that didn't have the 'magic'. And I said to myself, "what's going on here?" Because we've got a fantastic programme. It's free.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN:

So it's harder for us because, if it's free, it has to be really good.

CLAUDIA:

Oh, yes,

BORN:

Or they'll be "it's free ah it's rubbish. And I knew it was going to be rubbish because it's free" We need it to be "it's free, why is this free?" So I said, "we need to find what that magic is." So we did some split tests. We had two coaches, we watched what they did. One was a level three coach one was a level two coach...

CLAUDIA:

What is level 3? Is it harder?

BORN:

Yeah it's higher. So 3 is a higher qualification, a higher level of qualification you'd say. So technically you're more qualified and you should be better, in brackets, let's say.

And then we realised something we said, "You know what? It's not about qualification.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN:

It's about your people and communication skills, it's all about those 'soft skills'. So we decided we were going to audition every single coach. And then we gave them social media training, and then we gave them a bit more skills, all those, all those little soft things which...you take a photo you take everyone inside that photo, everyone smiling and share it. What happens on their Facebook, on their Instagram feed, the last thing they remember is them smiling. It could have been the hardest session in the world.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN: And they like it and they share and they come back next week. So there was little things we taught the coaches. And we started to get... I strongly believe we have the best coaches in the universe because they are super coaches. They are approachable. They remember your name, they adapt the session to suit everyone. And they take Parkers out for socials and have Christmas parties. They do that extra work. Which, as you grow as a bigger organisation, I can't physically see everyone like I used to. So we need to have these...we call them Coach Parkers... that are employing a level of social and, kind of, let's say gratitude to the Parkers who was turning up.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN: And that's what we went and did.

CLAUDIA:

That's fantastic. There are highs and lows, obviously in every business. Tell us about a standout high. And if you don't mind, a moment where you thought I just can't do this. This is too hard.

BORN:

I think the stand out moment has to be winning the the BT Sports Indury Award because that was a big award and we was up against some multi million pound companies and campaigns. I remember sitting there and we was at the back of the room as well because we couldn't really afford to pay for a table. And we were there, sitting down and everyone else on my table was going up and not being successful. And when it was like, I was the last person on that table....And then they coined it the 'losing table' and I was like "awh, I'm only here for the party." And then yeah, they said our name and I was over the moon! I was so proud of like, the coaches, the Parkers on that journey to get to that point. Because life as an entrepreneur can be very lonely. It can be, I mean, if you don't celebrate. And that's why we apply to awards. Because if you can't be recognised for what you're doing, you end up being on, I say, on this hamster wheel which keeps spinning and spinning and spinning. And there's no milestone to say, we did this, we did this, we did this.

CLAUDIA:

Yeah.

BORN: This is why we need to keep going. So that's, that's a high moment. That was a really high moment. And I mean, we've had...since then we've had lots of awards every year, sometimes multiple in one year.

CLAUDIA:

I've seen the list. It's amazing!

BORN:

Thankyou.

CLAUDIA: But what about a moment that was particularly challenging?

I mean, were there moments where you just went, you know what this is? This is too hard.

BORN:

Yeah, I think when it comes to a moment of 'this is too hard.' It's when I was probably sleeping four hours a day. And we had a quite a challenging client at the time as well. And one of the Boroughs we don't work with anymore. And it was, it was relentless. I was doing everything. So marketing, the planning, the coaches, the setting up the sessions, the risk assessments. And it came to a point where I remember sitting down one night... some nights I would have to work through the whole night to make sure I could get the thing sent over to the counsellors as in the beginning, we didn't have the software to pull the reports. So we said we did. But it was really me on Excel, pulling all these reports together! And it's because we had to get to the next level and the next level needed a bit more investment. But we needed to prove the concept to the people. So we did these fancy reports, and it took a lot of time to do. I remember my wife saying "you look too tired, you need to sleep, you need a rest, you're going to burn out" And I was like "I know, but I can't!" I literally couldn't stop.

CLAUDIA: It's not possible.

BORN:

It's not possible. And I managed to get through it. I managed to kind of deliver all the stuff we said we would deliver. And then after that point, I said, I'm never doing business with people I don't like because it's just emotionally draining and you end up being less productive because you're continuously worrying about trying to deliver something which is unreasonable. And that changed that changed us. And then obviously, now it's all automated. Everything you see just works in the back end. And we have, I wouldn't say we have a lot of time, but we have more time to do the things that really matter and that's talking on things like this, talking to the park is doing stuff and educating the coaches. So we do some stuff for coaches now where we try and help them with their business and give them guidance because a lot of them are freelance coaches, on how to grow themselves and give them really giving back. So yeah, that was a that was a low point I would say. That was near the beginning.

CLAUDIA:

What does - if this is not too weird a question - what does success look like to you? I mean, is that when you... I can only imagine... like when you go out there 10 classes happening all at the same time! Like our work is done? Or do you have an image for the future that...do you want to double your Parkers? What, what will it look like?

BORN:

So we race towards the future. For me success is, no matter where you are in the UK, you can access an Our Parks class in your park, you could walk out your door on a Saturday morning, or on a weekday evening and take part in higher quality exercise. It's a million plus users. It's also a workforce that isn't made up of your conventional coaches. It's giving people access to deliver high quality exercise that can't afford it at this precise moment. And the reason why I say that is because we're developing a coaching qualification, funded by Sport England, to give communities the opportunity to deliver coaching in their community. The biggest problem we have with inactivity is that when you look at the sector, that journey, and the amount of money it costs to do it, we are alienating so many good coaches.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN: And I liken this to the lollipop lady, our fantastic lollipop lady, on the way to school. She's amazing. She gets everyone across the road, she's happy, she dances. She is a coach. She is a coach, she should be delivering high quality exercise in the parks. And possibly she doesn't do it because she doesn't know she could do it. She can't afford to do it, or the access to allow her to do it is not accessible for her. So the future for me is kind of more Parker's more Coach Parker's, so that's individuals that would never have thought about coaching, delivering enthusiastic and structured sessions that's welcoming for everyone across the nation.

CLAUDIA: I have to ask about the album. I have to! Tell me all about the album you've just created.

BORN: Yes! Wow. So we've launched the first single. Guys, please go and stream it. All of the proceeds go towards making exercise free and accessible for the groups we just discussed. And the first single is by Born Barikor and it's called exercise. And the album is called Fitness King. And it's, it came about, again, from an innovation of...we listen to music, and we play music when we're exercising or working out. And we generally are playing a genre of music that isn't fit for the job we're trying to get done.

CLAUDIA: What does that mean? Tell me more.

BORN: So we're trying to exercise, but then you're listening to, I don't know, a genre of music which isn't around motivating you.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN: So we're talking about exercise. Keep on going.

CLAUDIA: Yes.

BORN: It's all around how many girls they got, how much money you've got. It's not really geared towards the job of working out and exercising.

CLAUDIA:

Yeah, you're completely right.

BORN:

So what I thought we'd do is why don't we make an album that is about exercising. It's got songs, it's got hooks, it's well produced, it's got lyrics, it's got punch lines. And we're gonna make it streamable and all of the proceeds go towards more exercise. It's just, it's just a build, measure, learn... a loop, that we can continue making albums and continue funding free exercise. If the people exercise and continue playing the music, and suddenly, we are doing the job that needs to be done. One, it's contributing to giving you the opportunity and atmosphere when you're working out, two it's funding exercise classes across the UK.

CLAUDIA:

I think what you're doing is utterly brilliant. Honestly, I know I sound like a weird orange old lady, but I think everybody needs to find out more about Our Parks because even if... if you can afford it, don't use it, but definitely tell people. Am I wrong? Am I right?

BORN:

I mean, definitely.

CLAUDIA:

Final question. Which class, if you like, are you the most proud of? Do you feel does the best job for the communities?

BORN:

Wow. That's a really good question. And I don't think there's a particular class. I think I'm just most proud of the word Parker.

CLAUDIA: Yeah.

BORN: And the way in which Parker's come in, and they really embrace the culture, the community, and they go to the classes and say, they're Parkers. So for me, every class that has Parkers in, I'm so proud of it because they go away, feeling like they belong to a community of people that are changing the way in which we do things for the greater good.

CLAUDIA:

Born, thank you so much. It was so lovely to speak to you. Thank you.

BORN:

Thank you, likewise.

CLAUDIA

And everybody just needs to look up Our Parks. I'm following you on Instagram. I've done the whole thing but everybody who's listening, please get involved.

BORN:

Thank you so much, Claudia. That was awesome and massive thank you to Vodafone for inviting me on.

CLAUDIA:

Thank you so much to Born Barikor for joining me on the podcast. It's so great to hear how Our Parks reaches customers that are often left out by the mainstream fitness industry. If you enjoyed this episode, it would be great if you could rate and review the podcast and also subscribe so you don't miss an episode. And if you're interested in getting support from Vodafone business vHub then you can find more information at vodafone.co.uk/business/vhub.

Next episode I'll be talking with the co-founder of Growing Underground, the world's first underground farm, to find out how on earth it all works.