

Ep5 Peanut - Transcript

SPEAKERS

Michelle Kennedy, Claudia Winkleman

Claudia Winkleman

Hello, this is Claudia Winkleman. Welcome to business unusual from Vodafone Business. So many of the businesses in this series have been based on the personal inspiration of the brilliant entrepreneurs who built them. In this episode, I'm talking to Michelle Kennedy, who is one of the team behind the dating app Bumble, before moving on to found Peanut an app for women that aims to make sure we don't have to navigate life alone, especially the hard parts. Peanut was inspired by Michelle's personal experience as a new mum. Like lots of us, she didn't quite know what to expect, but assume that everything would just fall into place somehow, one day, but the reality was a shock to the system. Since Peanut was born. It's become a community of more than 1.6 million women across the UK, the US and Canada with engagement up by more than 40% during the pandemic. It doesn't carry ads, it doesn't sell data to third parties, and it's free to its members. Michelle has raised more than 16 million pounds in investment for it and she joins me now from our office in London. Hello, Michelle.

Michelle Kennedy

Hello, Claudia.

Claudia Winkleman

You're such a clever human being Stop it. No, I swear to goodness, you create Bumble and then you go right i've had a baby, nothing works for me and you create Peanut it got mean, I want to talk about both but I also PS cannot wait for what's next. Why did you create peanut tell us?

Michelle Kennedy

Peanut was really born out of frustration I think about the products that were out there. That were aimed at motherhood at the time that I felt I really needed to use them. I've been working in tech for such a long time and kind of building all of this really innovative, cool, fun, experiential stuff. And then it was motherhood and it was forums and it was email distribution lists, and it just didn't feel like it represented either me as a mum or or women coming kind of behind me. But also, it just felt like it but little this huge seismic moment in a woman's life to kind of there there is no innovation that we can provide for you here. And that just felt so short sighted, you know if we think about the value of women in terms of household decisions on spend, and how valuable we are in kind of contributing to economics of society now to think that we weren't innovating and building products specifically for this life stage, felt really short sighted, so I thought I'd take it on.

Claudia Winkleman

I wish I'm now 74 but I wish I was having a baby now or a male always wish I was pregnant. To use it because it's also it can be a lonely time. You don't really I didn't I had no idea what I was doing.

Michelle Kennedy

I had absolutely no idea what to expect. I'm someone who kind of just expects that, you know, you do the right thing. So I had a I'm actually quite weird. I had a spreadsheet, bought the stuff on the spreadsheet saw that that was all that I needed. And then Finn arrived and I was like, oh god, it's me and you all day. Yeah, and everyone's at work and you don't talk and I just don't know what I'm doing. It's you know, it's two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, you can't just casually go out and see one of your girlfriends, she's at work. It's quite an isolating lonely experience. It's daunting, you don't know what's going on. And for me also, I felt so much of my identity was tied to who I was in a professional environment. Being at home for kind of prolonged periods of the day felt really isolating and I just didn't know how to find this new version of me and where to find it. So it is a hard moment in time but there are other like really seismic moments as well. If if you're trying to conceive, if you're going through IVF or adoption, surrogacy, those moments are frightening and isolating. If you're if you've got a five year old and none of your friends do and you know they're start having night terrors or whatever it might be. All of these moments are really impactful in your life and to not have a resource to help you and to find other women I think just felt there was an obvious need.

Claudia Winkleman

Peanut as you say, it started as an app for new mums to make friends but it's become a safe space where women can be open about sexual health sexual relationships. Was that a deliberate evolution by you? Did you think Oh no, this can be more this can be women, not just mums.

Michelle Kennedy

Honestly, when we started the the kind of friendship making element of Peanut was like the obvious shoe in, I'd been building dating apps. It felt like a natural progression to use that UI and those algorithms and apply it in a different market for that kind of surprise and delight element. It was fun. It was gamified. And it did solve a social need. But what we knew is we we wanted to build that community and social network element. What would it look like if we built a social network from completely the opposite life stage of every episode? Network we're all used to building or using sorry. So if you think about Facebook, or Instagram or Snapchat and you think about the founders behind them and the teams behind them, these young guys in college, what is the complete opposite life stage to that? Probably motherhood? And then what would it look like if we built a toolkit around that? And what would it look like if we built from this feminine economy perspective, rather than the masculine economy? So what if it didn't matter how many likes you've got? Or how many followers you've got? What if actually, all it meant was we just really focused on getting you one really relevant friend and strong connection? What if we just focused on you feeling nourished almost from the community that you join? So we knew we had that infrastructure that we wanted to build? I don't think what we really realised, when we first started building community, is how the community would take ownership and start really using it. The motherhood stuff is there, the pregnancy stuff is there. But actually, this is women talking about their sex lives, their relationships, their financial worries, their real life. It's so raw, it's so honest, I honestly feel privileged every day that we've built this platform that women talk about. We have pods now, which is live audio. So women kind of having live drop in audio conversations, you can drop in and out. There was a pod that went on for something like seven days continually. And it was women talking about leaving abusive relationships, we have women who are talking about

rekindling my sex life, you've got women who are talking about can anyone just in simple terms, explain what it means to be able to access ex credit for the government or whatever it might be. It's really, it's so incredible how vulnerable women will be with one another and how amazing they are. When you take anything out else out of the picture. So sorry to say it, but when you take men out of the picture, and it's just about women having that safe space, it's uplifting, it's it's just amazing. And I get really emotional about it. Because the conversations if it weren't for Peanut, where are women able to talk about those things? Where can they be so vulnerable? And that for me is like biggest privilege of my life really.

Claudia Winkleman

Oh, so vulnerable, and also so helpful. Women love talking but women also love fixing. I hate that idea. You know that people are men are fixers, what humans are fixes.

Michelle Kennedy

It's humanity at its best, you hear something you want to share, you want to help you want to push that woman further along, in her experience, journey, understanding whatever it is to make things better for her. And when I take it right back to the bare bones, and I think about when I used to go out and I was fundraising. And I would say to an investor, you know, moms actually, were the original influences. Yes, moms could make or break a business, they would matchmake people. And they would be the people who were recommending where you can fix and solve. And actually, that really is womanhood generally. So I completely think that women are influencers, honestly, just love listening to the pods I tune in every day.

Claudia Winkleman

When you started Pina, you said that the demographic of new mums was a forgotten demographic.

Michelle Kennedy

Totally, I believe it was, I think we're having a different conversation now around the issues that women encounter and are challenged by. But when we first started Peanut, no one was talking about that, you know, motherhood, really always made me think of my mom. It felt outdated. It didn't represent the woman that I felt I was the mother that I was. And so I do think it was a forgotten demographic. And I think things have moved on so much. But even during the pandemic, if you think about the fact that we were allowing people into a football stadium, and yet women were still having to birth alone, there is still an overlooked element of new motherhood, and however, progressive conversations that still exists, and that's still there. So I do feel it was overlooked. But you know, I feel there are so many different parts of womanhood that are overlooked, we've just built and are going to release soon Peanut menopause for women who are going through or thinking that they're just starting to experience the early start of menopause. And that, for me was absolutely critical. Because you know what, it is a certainty that 50% of the population are going to experience that life stage. And where's the support? How do you know if your mum isn't talking to you about it? If your auntie doesn't tell you about it, how are you meant to kind of experience that and understand it. So it's really about finding these life stages that are impacting women and building around it.

Claudia Winkleman

You are so energised by Peanut, what still excites you about the product you mentioned menopause? Is it listening to the brilliant conversations? What is it?

Michelle Kennedy

For too long, women have not had safe spaces if we think about the fact that 85% of women online have witnessed or experienced harassment, and whether that is sexual harassment, violent threats, or general, hate speech and bullying, then the need to have a safe space online is absolutely apparent and essential. And so I think that the thing that keeps me energised is when I see these conversations, or I listen to the conversations, and I see women who are saying, this has made my life better, or thank God, I've got this place that I can come and be part of. And I suppose it is just legitimising like women's voices and women's lives. And that is, I will never get tired of that. Even if you know, Peanut imploded tomorrow, I'll never stop doing it. Because we need more women to do it. So that the women who are coming behind us always have a safe space.

Claudia Winkleman

And this is what I love about the safe space. It's reinforced by the fact that you don't know the other woman you're speaking to, you could be talking to one of your friends, but you speak differently. When you're speaking anonymously.

Michelle Kennedy

Yeah, so we have both you can speak kind of tied to your identity, or you can speak incognito, we call it and you're right, there is a certain honesty that sometimes comes with anonymity. What we try and do, because of the importance of safety on Peanut is discourage anyone using anonymity as a way to mask toxic or bullying or hate speech. And so we we build a lot of tools around that we use sentiment analysis, we use natural language detection. And we really think about what AI and tools exist in order to improve the experience so that you're not going on and seeing a platform full of negativity, you're just going on. And of course, there will always be topics where women feel that they can't be honest, sometimes it's hard for me, I want to go on there. And I don't want people to say Oh God, founder of Peanut, having a moan about X. So yeah, you know, sometimes there are things that we have to be kind of you want that anonymity for, but generally speaking, I hope that the focus that we have on making people feel proud of their identity and able to show it on peanut and knowing that it's okay to be who you are on Peanut, it's not about your best life. I don't care go to Instagram for your best life. That's not Peanut, we're just here for your real life. And I think that's what is most comforting.

Claudia Winkleman

The majority of investors are men. So I'm picturing you. Brilliant Michelle, in a room full of men, nothing wrong with men. They're magnificent. And they are you trying to tell them that women need this? What was the reaction?

Michelle Kennedy

You know, look, it's really hard. It's no secret 2% of all venture capital went to women last year. And to me, that is the most depressing statistic. Everyone should feel depressed men and women alike, because we know that founding teams that have women on them, or are women founded so they have incredible return rates for their investors, and we know that they perform better. So the fact that all male

teams are still getting 98% of funding is so depressing. And we have to question why because women aren't at the table writing the checks. Or if they are at the table writing checks. Do they always want to be the person who invests in the woman founder or the women focus business? Because that that pigeonhole them in a certain way? There are so many kind of power dynamics at play. It was hard, it's still hard. I even had a conversation with someone yesterday who said, Yeah, I just do you think you have the potential to be as big as Facebook? And I was like, wow, yes, it's 50% of the population, dude. But I don't know how else to explain

Claudia Winkleman

P.S. who uses Facebook anymore? How embarrassing.

Michelle Kennedy

I know, you know what I mean? So imagine still having that conversation. And, you know, we've got over 2 million women who are using Peanut and yet that's and we're only in a couple of countries. We're not even a global product yet. So the fact that there even is a conversation around whether it's a valid market is like mind blowing to me, if you look at Maven, which is a health care company in the US focused, focused on women's health, they just had a billion dollar valuation. And everyone's like, majorly excited, but no one more excited than me because I remember when no one would fund Kate, I remember conversations with the founder, where she was like, You know what, we had to do a bridge, we had to do another bridge. People weren't funding us until they started to understand Oh, yeah, this is really valid. And yet our people funding companies which solve issues of male pattern baldness or erectile dysfunction? Yeah, they are. So there is this like really challenging market place where there aren't enough women writing the checks. And yet, that's so much pressure on the women who can write the checks to only invest in women, men have to do it too. So I'm really lucky, we have some incredible investors, who are men who are brilliant, who understand the sides of market. But that doesn't mean that I didn't have to go through conversations such as, Oh, my God, the last thing my wife needs is another social network, never talked to me. And I was like, well/

Claudia Winkleman

Maybe that's not why she's not talking to you.

Michelle Kennedy

I can see why she doesn't, you know, we had, I had conversations like that, and I don't know whether they'll ever go away. The problem also is, people recognise themselves in patterns. So if you see yourself in someone sitting across the table from you, and you recognise the patterns, they're explaining in terms of whatever it might be user behaviour, whatever. And you've seen that have success before you want to invest in more of that, investing in something that is taking a different approach. If I say to someone, we prioritise safety over anything else, and they don't understand why that's important. That's obviously you're coming from a completely different perspective to someone who says, we prioritise growth over everything else. And I'm like, I know the growth is there, I already see it. But I have to do it in a controlled way. Because these women have to feel like Peanut is their safe space. So I want to say it's getting better. But you know, we know last year it got worse for women. So let's see what this year brings.

Claudia Winkleman

How techie? Are you? Do you need to be technically gifted? If you like to run a digital business?

Michelle Kennedy

Absolutely. I can hand on heart say, I do not code. I'm not an engineer. I can talk enough engineering talk to hire people, I can understand how to explain what we're trying to build. But I'm not a designer, and I'm not an engineer. And so really, it's just about finding the right talent, who can understand what you're trying to build, and then interpret that and who believe in it, and want to build it. But no, you don't have to be an engineer. Great. If you are kids, if you're listening, oh my god, the new rock stars, please go and learn to code. It's such an incredible, life changing skill, it's only becoming more in demand.

Claudia Winkleman

More from my chat with Michelle in just a moment. First I want to introduce an exciting new initiative from Vodafone Business. In the last year, there's been a huge rise in the need for businesses to get online. Small and Medium Enterprises make up 99.9% of the UK business population. Founders and entrepreneurs have never had so many decisions to make when it comes to technology. Digital skills are more important than ever, but at least a third of small business owners in the UK said they aren't sure which tools will best suit their needs. Many haven't invested in any digital support. Some have only the most basic cybersecurity. That's why Vodafone have introduced business dot connected a free online training programme to support 100,000 businesses across the UK. It offers free webinars, workshops, and online training modules. There are different levels of upskilling to cater to those just starting that online journey, as well as businesses looking to build on existing experience. Find out more by Vodafone Business, online knowledge and Resource Centre V Hub, where you can sign up to business connected and connect your business to the free tools and training you need to digitally transform search Vodafone Business V Hub. Michelle, I've got to ask you, you are the founder and the CEO. What's the difference between the roles for you?

Michelle Kennedy

Oh, it's a good question. So I've been a CEO before, the role was very much around executing on the vision. But as the founder, you're kind of that person who is thinking about what are we trying to achieve. And then it's really kind of getting the right team on board to pull it all together. So being the founder is having the idea and getting started. Both are exciting. And very much intertwined, I suppose. But I have never been a sole founder before Peanut

Claudia Winkleman

Which is if I can decide see this your favourite bit?

Michelle Kennedy

I'm always thinking about what's next, you know, future. Who are we going to build for next? What might that look like? How do we articulate it? And so I think at the moment, I'm the most excited because who is building in this space and really anyone who's listening if you're not building in this space and you think that you should be pleased do because we need more like you know that there has to be more innovation there has to be more creativity and so I take it really seriously I feel like we have a massive responsibility to not let these women down and, and build for them. And I think that is

the most excited I've been since I kind of dipped my toe out there. And I was like, does anyone want this?

Claudia Winkleman

Can I also just say, for me and my friends, as parents of teenagers, we'd like teen Peanut, somewhere for them to go, which isn't about likes, and weird dances.

Michelle Kennedy

Totally understand that.

Claudia Winkleman

Team Peanut go for it. Um, let me ask you about women and business, is it? Is it harder for women in business?

Michelle Kennedy

I think the answer to that is, it is in several ways. But it doesn't have to be. So the first is, I don't know how anyone else feels or anyone listening. But I never was taught what a network was, or the importance of networking. And so actually, in like, real life, socially, I'm quite awkward, and I am probably a bit too much I'm even doing it now too many arm movements, and too much kind of overcompensating because I get nervous. Therefore walking into a room, and having to understand the value of each person in that room. And what they can potentially do for my future just was something that I couldn't even like conceive, I couldn't understand that mentality. And yet, I do think that there is something with particular people, I think men in business in particular way, you know, it might be easier because there are more of them. To break the ice. I think that networking is not as challenging. So I do think that networking always felt like a mystery. And the best thing I can do now is open my network up to other women so that they feel that they can access it. And then the women that I know, ask them to share their networks so that we start building networks, so that it doesn't feel like a mystery anymore. It just feels like we share and we open doors for one another. So I think that can be hard. You know, let's just be honest, it's really hard when you've got other family commitments, and it's still you that holds it all together, my husband's amazing, I'm not going to knock him at all. But ultimately, if there's one person who's going to check that our family members got their vaccination, or they've got whatever, it's me, if I'm going to make sure that someone got a birthday present, or someone got, you know, anniversary card, or whatever it is me all that kind of invisible labour stuff. It we're still doing it. So now you're doing that and you're running a business. Maybe you've got children, or maybe you've got other commitments, you know that that's a lot. So I do think it's hard. And I do think that the major, major thing, major challenge is childcare. And we saw it in the pandemic, I was running a business, and I've got my seven year old and we're trying to do homeschooling, and I've got my two year old who thinks it's amazing that everyone's at home. She's like, yeah, and you know, it's It was awful. And we haven't nailed childcare in this country. And we, you know, the US haven't nailed it either. So that those kind of elements will always be blockers to women in business, sadly. And now we know there's more blockers, women are dropping out of the workforce during menopause because they don't have the right support and understanding and education around it. So there are so many potential barriers. It's just about educating people so we can take them away I think. I don't have the childcare solution. I don't know what the solution is there. We just haven't nailed it.

Claudia Winkleman

Creches in schools that works got to be Yeah, it's great. What is your advice to other women, and also, maybe more importantly, men in business?

Michelle Kennedy

I mean, everyone talks about men being being an ally, and make sure you are an ally. And I mean, obviously, I'm going to say yes, be an ally. But but it's more than that, right? It's just about the things that you take for granted, ensuring that you know, maybe you're opening up more. So if you have contacts, if you have network, Share, share the introduction, share the network. be overly helpful in that way. Don't talk across your your colleagues in a meeting, don't take their ideas don't you know, and some of this stuff is not happening from a position of being malicious. It's just because that's the dynamic that we that we have. So just being hyper aware of these things, I think it's important for women in business, I always am going to say it, but pull another woman up behind you. It's really hard. Just Just be aware, don't make her suffer in the same way that you suffered, because we've all got to learn actually make it easier for her so that we can get more women around the table and we can see more women in top positions. And that means that you don't have to mentor everyone. I think the word mentor is always really scary and people like oh gosh, will you be my mentor and then it makes it feel like another pressure that women have and another obligation. Don't make it necessarily so structured as that but just be aware of pulling other women up behind you whether that's nominating them for for stuff, pushing them to ask for that pay rise, pushing them to ask for that promotion that they wouldn't ordinarily. And being aware of it and just being aware of the language we use, you know, if someone's had a baby and they return it's not how was your break? It's not a break having a baby maternity isn't a holiday in it just being aware of that, because that infiltrates the whole kind of culture of your team just being aware of saying welcome, you know, we've missed you, whatever, that fine, but let's not kind of make that person already feel that they're in a different life stage, I think that can be really damaging.

Claudia Winkleman

Was there a moment? Are there moments when you think this isn't gonna work? Or for you? Do you have to be supremely confident to make it whoosh and take off?

Michelle Kennedy

Oh, my God, I have that moment every day. Oh, god, what if you know, people don't like this? Or, you know, what, if something happens tomorrow, and implodes, the feelings I have, I think is the founder are very extreme. And it's so weird like that one thing that felt like the biggest thing in the world, all of a sudden, you just take it for granted. So I remember the, when we launched, to get a feature on the App Store by Apple was like, Oh, my God, we're on the app store as a feature. And now it's like, if I don't get the feature, I'm like, why didn't we get the feature team? What happened there? So everything goes from kind of feeling like the most important thing to taking taken for granted. And sometimes you forget to think about how major some of that stuff is. And I do still have that if someone in the US like, posts about us, or writes something and you know, the team are like going wild. And in my head. I'm like, well, that's, that's amazing. But I want more, how do I get more of that when we deserve more, so it can start to feel a bit like we take everything for granted? And I don't know whether I'm right in saying this, but for me anyway, the self doubt and the kind of will people like it? Are we doing good enough? Are we

doing a good enough job is probably what keeps me going every day just to keep going and working harder. There are moments where it's 11 o'clock at night, and I'm really tired. And I haven't got a fancy dress for Finn for school because it's Romans day. And I feel like I've really messed up on everything. And I'm like, I don't do this anymore. It's too much. And then obviously, the next day it's, you know, you're back at it. So it's real life where we're all trying to get through it. And but I do think that that wanting everyone to love it is what keeps me going.

Claudia Winkleman

Peanut is free, you don't monetize? Why did you make that decision? Because I'm sure people would pay for it.

Michelle Kennedy

Yes, it's not that it will always be completely all free forever. But honestly, there are two reasons. The first reason is, don't we deserve the same chance as Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, all these guys who were building for years before they introduced monetization. And my thought was we do we deserve to build traction, we deserve to build something where the engagements good, the retention is good. And we have to build that community around it and the product and become best in class. And so that was focus number one. And focus number two is everyone thinks that when it's to do with women, mothers as a starting point, it should be an ad model, or a brand model. And actually, what I learned from the dating industry is much more around a freemium model with premium features and gamifying the product and so that takes time to build that and build the foundations of it. And that's the direction of travel for us. So it's not that the entirety of Peanut will always be free. But the premise of connecting finding support and community on Peanut that will always be free. And it's really important.

Claudia Winkleman

That's brilliant. I'm gonna ask you two quick fires. Do you mind?

Michelle Kennedy

Do it.

Claudia Winkleman

What three words would you use to describe Peanut?

Michelle Kennedy

Community, support, love.

Claudia Winkleman

And what three things could Peanut not not live without?

Michelle Kennedy

Pink. As I sit in my pink office. The team and women womanhood.

Claudia Winkleman

I love those answers. Thank you so much. What's next? What's Peanut Start Her?

Michelle Kennedy

Peanut Start Her. Oh my god, this is a passion play for me. And I'm really, really obsessed by it. When we think about fundraising and the fundraising landscape for women and 2% of venture capital going to women, the point of the matter is, by the time you get to VC, you're already so far along. You're already so much more accelerated than anyone else who's thinking about just starting a business that we started to think about what impact can we make on changing the landscape of founders from an earlier stage and so when people go out and do an initial fundraise. There's this elusive friends and family round. And I remember even when I was fundraising for Peanut, I was like, who has friends who can just write 50k cheque? Like, who has that Auntie who can do that. And so, Peanut Start Her is a micro Fund, which is about writing those first, early checks. Think of us as your friends and family. Think of us as your rich Auntie who can write that 25-50k cheque, and to get you started. And most importantly, from there, if you are selected, we have an amazing Investment Committee of power women, and they all open their networks and you have office hours. So whether it's Vanessa King Gauri, who's the publisher of British Vogue, whether it's Anu Degale, who's the founder of female Founders Fund, we have these amazing women who open their networks to you, we make the investment but most importantly, we introduce you to people in our networks so that you have access to understand how to spend the money in the right way for your business to develop.

Claudia Winkleman

Brilliant sounds so exciting. Michelle, it's been so fantastic to talk to you.

Michelle Kennedy

Thank you very, very much. Thank you.

Claudia Winkleman

Thank you so much for listening to Business Unusual from Vodafone Business. Next time I'm meeting the founder of Jamii a discount card and discovery platform, which champions black British business. Khalia Ismain will tell me how the Black Lives Matter movement has had a huge impact on her company. Please rate and review the podcast and subscribe to hear lots more from the UK's most invigorating entrepreneurs for me for now. Goodbye.