

Ep7 – Izzy Wheels - Transcript

SPEAKERS

Claudia Winkleman, Ailbhe Keane

Claudia Winkleman

Hello and welcome. I'm Claudia Winkleman. This is Business Unusual from Vodafone Business. In this series I get to meet some of the UK most entrepreneurial minds. Every single one of them is a founder who has created their own company, and in the case of my guest today also improve people's lives. She is the winner of 15 major awards, including being named as one of the leaders of tomorrow. She's a Forbes 30 under 30 honoree, who's been featured in Vogue, Elle and Oprah's Magazine. Today, the company that started in her kitchen is worth millions and sells to more than 50 countries. She is Ailbhe Keane, her brand, Izzy Wheels customises wheelchairs to help young people who use them show their personality. Ailbhe is talking today for the first time since she secured an exclusive contract with a huge global brand. And she joins me now from Dublin. Hello Ailbhe. Thank you so much for talking to us.

Ailbhe Keane

Oh, Claudia. So nice to talk to you. Thank you so much for having me.

Claudia Winkleman

No, we will always have you! As I read that out 15 major awards, Forbes 30 under 30 Oprah's magazine, Vogue. Elle. Are you a bit? Yeah, yes, I sort of I thought all of that would happen.

Ailbhe Keane

No, not at all. And yeah, I'm just smiling away to myself as you reading. And yeah, like it has been so crazy. And when I started doing this, I had no idea it was gonna grow into what it did. So yeah, it's real. Pinch me every day.

Claudia Winkleman

You are a graphic designer. And you draw paint and create individual spoke guards, I believe for people's wheelchairs. But the Izzy from Izzy Wheels is your sister. Tell us more.

Ailbhe Keane

Yes, yes so. Izzy is my little sister. She's four years younger than me. And he was born with a condition called Spina Bifida. And it means Izzy has no feeling or movement from her waist down. So she has been a wheelchair user all her life. And anybody who meets Izzy, like, the first thing you notice is that she is just the most bubbly, positive person ever. And growing up, she's always been a wheelchair user. But she would notice that the first thing that people would see about her was her wheelchair, and she loved her wheelchair. But when we would meet her, they wouldn't know that straightaway. So I always wanted to create something that made her feel more confident in her wheelchair. And, you know, so her wheelchair was more than a medical device, it was, you know, something that could be

celebrated. So even when we were little girls, our favourite thing was always to decorate her chair for special occasions. And that's really where the idea for what then became his he really came from.

Claudia Winkleman

I mean it's so clever. And you are an obviously you're a genius, but the way you describe it, there you go. Well, of course, of course, because we want to personalise everything we have whether it's a school notebook, I'm sure when Izzy's at school, she's like, Yeah, I want to make this is my water bottle. Of course, why wouldn't people want to do that? Also with their wheelchairs? As positioning statements go, I think yours is the best I've ever heard. Could you could you tell us?

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah, our motto is, if you can't stand up stand out. Everything we do as a brand is all about standing out for all the right reasons. And that whole idea came from when we were little girls, and it really just embodies our whole brand is about. And like, honestly, looking back now, when we were a little girls, you still have the photos of Daisy, like on Christmas Day with her bottles in your wheels. And for birthdays, where she put ribbons and everything. And she's always wanted to stand out. And her wheel chair has always made her stand down. But now she stands out for all the right reasons and in a way that she loves.

Claudia Winkleman

Absolutely. And I assume it can be a different design for a different day, depending on how they're feeling. Sometimes you wake up and you do want bubbles next day, you want something else.

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah, absolutely. Like the whole idea is that like you like waking up every day and being able to wear whatever you want. And your wheel chair really is an extension of your body if it is something that you use every day. So you should be able to dress it like you would yourself. And so that's really where the idea came from. But I guess I kind of going back to like the idea was there your kids and I always loved art and design. And that's why I chose to go to art college. It was always my dream to go. And when I was in my final year, we had a self directed brief so you could work on whatever you wanted. And that's when I decided this is a really good opportunity to you know, work on that idea. We had your kids have decorating wheelchairs, so I spent a full year designing all different ways for Izzy's chair. So the idea is that her wheels matched her outfits. And it really started off as a personal project, I had no idea that it was going to become a business. And as soon as Izzy started wearing the designs, just the reaction that she got from people, people were stopping their car, and rolling out the window and saying, oh my god, I love your wheels, like people are coming through the street. And it became this amazing conversation started. And it addressed her wheel chair in a really, really positive way. And she loved that. And it just gave her so much confidence. And I just love to have that made me feel really good as a sister, and I just I loved how good it made her feel. And even still, then, like it still never clicked that like this could be your business. And Izzy used to go to camp every summer. And it was all wheel chairs at the camp. And when they saw her wheels, they all wanted some tea. So meet them for a frantic camp. And it just grew very, very organically. And then something really crazy happened. Like I just finished college. And I was at a turning point where I was wondering, What am I going to do, I'm going to pursue this like will I apply for jobs, I wasn't sure. But I wasn't really ready to let go of the

project because I just I knew how much I made, how good I made my sister feel. And I knew it could make other people feel good too. And we got contacted by someone from Business Insider, and they said, we saw your Instagram. And we love it. And could we make a video about your Instagram? So we said yes, having no idea what's gonna happen, really. And a video that we made got 3 million views in a day, and 16 million views in a week.

Claudia Winkleman

Oh, my goodness.

Ailbhe Keane

So yeah, it was crazy. So Izzy was 18, I was 22, we suddenly had this huge viral moment. And we're getting thousands of messages from wheelchair users and families and from designers, and everybody just wanted to support this. So we just took the plunge and we set up our own business.

Claudia Winkleman

I mean, holy moly. Number one, I'm so grateful that these people wanted to make a video. And also how wonderful that everybody the whole community of whether it was designers, or people who wanted one for themselves, came forward and said, We're with you. But that must have been quite overwhelming for a 22 year old woman.

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah, it was, I guess, because I didn't really have any business experience. Like I had done like some freelance work in college, I've written retail jobs. But like I knew down the line, I'd always love to have my own design, business, whatever that looked. And at 22, I just thought you know what, I actually have nothing to lose. I really was passionate about what I was doing. I knew people really liked the product. And all of those other parts of business I didn't know so much about at the time, I just learned, like the best way of learning how business works is to just apply to what you're doing. So all those things like already, like really scary, like finance, marketing, sales, all those things that sounded daunting when I was in school, when you're actually doing them yourself. It's actually it's really rewarding, and it's not scary. So I would encourage anyone who's in college who has a good idea, not to be afraid, just go for it. Like you don't have to go into like a really big organisation to get that experience. Like the experience you can get from setting up your own business, even if it doesn't take off is so beneficial and will stand you forever.

Claudia Winkleman

I love that advice, because we'll have so many budding entrepreneurs listening. And also, I loved the thing that you said earlier, which is I realised I had nothing to lose, because there is a joy in youth, it's you and your sister you and your family and 16 million views in a week and you guys just going okay, I guess this is what we're doing.

Ailbhe Keane

So it was stressful at the time as well because, you know, like went from being a small little thing to suddenly being like so overwhelmed like nothing can prepare you for that to suddenly having like hundreds and hundreds of emails all these new followings. And it was crazy, but it was it was amazing.

And people still find us from that video. And that was 2017. And so people will find out from that. But so much has happened since then, like when that happened. It was just me designing the wheel covers. And after we had that rock viral video and the amount of message we've got from designers wondering how could they get involved. So since then, we've now worked with 90 different artists and these are illustrators, painters, graphic designers, and so a whole range of different types of designers. And then we've also worked with brands. So two years ago, we actually got a call from Barbie, because because he has a really easy love Barbie lover when you're younger, and we got an email from barbie dot com and we just assumed your like subscribed or something. And they were looking to talk to us. So we got on a call with them and they said they love what we're doing. And they were going to be launching an inclusive Barbie doll who was going to use a wheelchair and we work with Barbie to help make her wheelchair glam. So it was so fun we got to design for this cover is the barber's chair. And what was really special about that was like when she was younger, she didn't have a toy that represented her. And when she was in school, like for most of her time in school, she was the only only girl in school used a wheelchair. So if she had a toy that represented that, it just normalises it for kids. And you can see that a wheelchair isn't just for sick people or old people, it can be for just an everyday person too. And a wheelchair doesn't have to be something scary. It can actually be something lovely and something glamorous and something fashionable.

Claudia Winkleman

Yeah, something. Yeah, you're totally right. I need to ask you about technology and connecting with the world. So I think you would say it's been vital to Izzy Wheels, am I right?

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah, 100%. So every part of our business is digital from even the designs that we do. So I'm a graphic designer by trade, and all of my designs are done digitally. And then our store itself is we sell purely ecommerce. So everything is sold through our website, every pair we'll cover is his digitally printed, and everything is made to order specifically for that user. And like we're based in Dublin, and everything is made here and packaged here. But it allows us to ship all over the world. So we're based here, but we now sell in over 50 countries. And that is thanks for technology 100%.

Claudia Winkleman

And made to order, is that important to you so that people get something totally specific to them? Or is it also so that you don't waste anything? There are no off cuts?

Ailbhe Keane

Yes, there is no off cuts. So that's something that I'm really lucky that if you build a business from scratch, those are the kind of things you can implement from the very beginning. So I know it is an option for a lot of people that's an that they do do is if they mass produce overseas, and yeah, it can be cheaper, but you really do have to think about your footprint. And like if you're shipping stuff across the seas, like there's such a negative impact on environment. And then also, you can be left with a load of stock that people won't want, like, you know, seasons come and go, like certain designs are more popular at different times of the year. And we're made to order which means every pair of wheel covers is specifically made for that person. So it allows us to carry over 100 different designs in a whole range of sizes, and it means that nothing will go to waste. So that's been something that's really important to

us. And it keeps the jobs local as well. So, you know, we have a really good relationship with our printer here. And we can pop round to them whenever we want to. And then we're like our friends and our family now. And you just don't get that if you produce yourself on the other side of the world.

Claudia Winkleman

Absolutely, I was about to ask you, because I know it's important for you that you are based your business is based in Ireland. And you were keen to keep everything there. Why? Why is that? Other than the fact that it is of course home?

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah, it told me and as I said, like, we don't want a business that's gonna create waste. Like when I studied art in college, like there's also the fashion department in NCD, which is the college I went to the National College of Art and Design. And you do you learn about the negative impacts of fast fashion in college. And it is something that is really great about when you build your business from scratch. So that's something that's been important to us. And also, when we produce the things ourselves, it does allow us to build that really special relationship with our users. So every single person who orders a pair, wheel cover the most, we always try and deliver more than what's expected. So when that person does get that pair of wheel covers in the post, me and Izzy handwrite every single customer letter. And it's just really special because everyone then feels like included, and they feel special. And that's what's so important. And what's the real benefit of having a small business because a big business can't do that. But that's something that's important to us. And that's where, you know, because this grew so quickly, and we really want to always make sure that we're staying true to why we set it up. And that was to give wheelchair users the power to express themselves and we wanted them to feel heard and part of this really positive, fun, colourful community. And when we write them a letter, they feel part of that. So you know, as this is growing, we are wondering, what's the best way to market this in a way that feels really true to what we do. And what happened very organically was when people were receiving their wheel covers and getting their letter They're so taking a photo of themselves with their wheel covers and sending it to me and Izzy. And that's where the idea for our spokespeople of the week came from.

Claudia Winkleman

I love that.

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah. And that's our spokes people community. And so you know, me and Izzy are just one story like where she says you're from the west of Ireland, you're really colourful, but we're one story. And every single person you put on a pair of the wheel covers have their own story. These are people in 55 different countries, they have their own story, they got their own style. And when they take those photos, like we share them with our community, and then it means that people can relate. People can relate to you all the different folks people and feel that our brand represents them as well. So that's something that's been really special and an unexpected part of when we set up the business. And but it's like the most important part of my business. I love the most.

Claudia Winkleman

More from my chat with Ailbhe in just a moment. First, I want to introduce an important 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 their 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. How does it feel? If this isn't a strange question, to be thought of as a successful entrepreneur, I mean, deeply successful entrepreneur? And how important is it to you to keep developing your skill set? Because it's not that you're not one? It's that you came at this from a slightly different, it wasn't your aim. It's happened. But how does it feel?

Ailbhe Keane

Like the beginning there? Definitely imposter syndrome. Like when he and I would go to business events, we just got like real oddballs, because we always kind of have in our vaults like are really really colourful, we're extremely bubbly and chatty, and we go to business events, like, unfortunately, it is predominately medical. And at the beginning, we're kind of felt like oh, no, do people think we're a bit strange, but then we just embrace that. And the whole being really out there and colourful, it's become such an important part of our brand. And it means that people can't really recognise us now. And like, we don't feel now we do feel like, you know, we're part of the community and that we deserve to be there. Like, we work really hard. And we have built a successful business from being, like completely true to ourselves. And, like, I never knew that this is where I was gonna end up like it is, like, when you think about it, it seems like something very niche. But when you look at it, like on a global scale, there's so many people out there that want something like this. And and like it's just it's been my dream job. Like we get to work with all of my favourite designers and Izzy's favourite designers. And that just is such a privilege. So like, when you're starting out, like even if your idea seems like something really, really niche. Go for it, like the more obscure it is the better because that's what makes the business real different. That's what makes will make your business stand out.

Claudia Winkleman

Absolutely. Talk to me about your marketplace. How many competitors do you have out there? And do you worry about that?

Ailbhe Keane

Well, I guess for every business, if you don't already have competitors, and you have created some guests good idea, you're going to have competitors. So for us, like when we first started making these wheel covers, like the idea for this existed when he was younger, but they just were designed for children's chairs, there was nothing for young adults or adults. And the designs were kind of more like Clip Art designs. They weren't like designer. So rather than kind of thinking like, oh, it already exists.

Like we're aware of that. So we just did what was already there, but just did it in a new way that was innovative. And that was stylish. And that's the same with everything. And I feel like if there is no competitors, then they're definitely coming down the line for every business and not to be afraid of that. And if something does exist, it can be done in a better way it can be done in a way that is unique. So that's doesn't didn't really bother us, and like the disability community and other businesses in the space that we're in, like, you know, everyone's very supportive of each other, it's a really lovely community. And, like, we're happy to promote everybody else and just have other people, other businesses have with us. So it's a really, really friendly space 100%. And we love seeing other businesses popping up in this space, because, like, we're passionate about this. And the reason we set this up is because, like, the disability fashion space is completely underserved. So we're always happy to see other people enter the space.

Claudia Winkleman

How would you like to see online trading and E commerce develop, if you like?

Ailbhe Keane

I guess it's changing all the time. And with social media changing all the time. Like, the biggest thing, though, I guess, is going back to the users and asking them what they want, and not just creating things for the sake of it. So we're always really conscious that, you know, we're going back to our community and asking them what they want. And I think a lot of people don't do that, they might just try and copy what's already out there. But, you know, like, go back to the users, see what they want, see if there's something that's missing, and that's where I wanted to ecommerce space develop,

Claudia Winkleman

How do you get the most out of digital marketing, I mean, your Instagram is fabulous, there are designs on there, that is so beautiful, and it just burst with joy with colour. Do you view that as sort of shop front?

Ailbhe Keane

100%, like our sales all come from our social media. And like as you go, as you grow, and like you learn that the different platforms kind of have their own different purposes. So our Instagram is super colourful. And it's like an art gallery, and everything is really carefully curated. And often, that's where designers will find us. So they'll see all the beautiful designs there. And then Facebook is slightly different, we share kind of more longer format posts there. And it's more about the stories of the wheelchair users. And that's where we've got a lot of customers, because those are very shareable posts. And they can get shared in different groups that will be relevant to the disability community or a disability fashion community. And then our Twitter is kind of more geared out. I guess, if we've been in any interesting press, that kind of side of things. That's where you get kind of more of the journalists hanging out.

Claudia Winkleman

Let's talk about your next collaboration, because you've collaborated with Hello Kitty, and Barbie. And something huge is coming. So for anybody listening, going, hmm, I know somebody who needs this over share with the group.

Ailbhe Keane

So like from day one, when I was thinking like, who are the brands that we'd love to work with, this was the brand that number one was always top of my list. And the brand is Disney. So would mean as your kids, we love Disney. And like every kid loves Disney, like all their favourite characters. And we've actually made it happen. So on the first September, we are going to be launching an exclusive collaboration with Disney and Marvel. So it's so exciting. It's been in the pipeline now for over a year. And we've just poured our heart and soul into this collection. I created all of the designs myself. And using all the Disney Style archives. It was an absolute dream collaboration. And oh my god, it was yeah, it was so special. And I'm just so excited for the world to see the designs.

Claudia Winkleman

I cannot wait, for anybody listening. They just need to find you on Insta or as you say or Facebook or Twitter but Insta might be the best one for this. I mean, I just need to ask for for the world. Is there a Frozen? Are there Frozen wheels?

Ailbhe Keane

Yes, there's going to be Frozen wheels.

Claudia Winkleman

Just had to ask because I imagined that would go down very well.

Ailbhe Keane

Yes, I think so. Like it was really like so fun. I just so many amazing characters. So it was actually hard to narrow it down to them I love Disney and like as any kid who's into art and drawing and cartoons, like it was always a dream direct is the other thing for every kid. So when we got the call from Disney, it was literally a dream come true. And I'm just so excited for everyone to see it.

Claudia Winkleman

And how did you do the deal, was was that them finding you or you going? Guys? I've got a plan. Leave this with me.

Ailbhe Keane

Yeah, so like every one of the big brand partnerships you've done has happened in a different way. So Barbie contacted us. And Hello Kitty, I pitched to them. So I basically went to Hello Kitty and told them they have to work with us in a way like it'd be too amazing of an opportunity for them not to take. Because I love Hello Kitty when I was younger, and they were a dream to work with our Disney. Like it's such a big company and there's so many people and like it interviews and people would ask as well be your dream collaboration. I just kept saying Disney hoping that maybe someday somebody might hear. And that's what happened. So we are on a morning showing in Ireland, and the interviewer asked us, you'll be doing collaboration and me and Izzy said, Disney and someone from Disney just happened to be watching the show that day. And yeah, and they went on their website, and they dropped me an email. And they said, they don't know if anything will come from it. So don't get your hopes up. But they've sent out our details to someone internally to see if you know if it might be something could

happen down the line. And it just grew and grew from there. And like, so literally is just like, if there's something you really want, just put it out there to the universe, no matter how big because when it comes something like that, like I would have no idea where to start. I didn't know anyone who worked with them.

Claudia Winkleman

I would have had no idea. I'd have to walk around shouting. Anybody know? Yeah.

Ailbhe Keane

Exactly. And that's what happened. And yeah, we've been working with the team in there. And there's so so lovely. And, you know, for Disney, like they're really keen to make their brand more accessible as well. Because, you know, wheelchair users should be able to have their favourite characters and their wheels as well. And I just wish for Izzy she had something like that when she was younger. So I know that there'll be so many kids that this is just going to mean so much to you. So I'm so excited.

Claudia Winkleman

I cannot wait to see the designs, huge congratulations on that. Before I say goodbye, I want to say thank you so much for talking to us. And I have a couple of quickfire questions. Do you mind? Sure. No, go ahead. What three words would you use to describe Izzy Wheels?

Ailbhe Keane

Colourful.

Claudia Winkleman

Yeah.

Ailbhe Keane

Positive. And vibrant.

Claudia Winkleman

Fantastic. And what three things couldn't your business live without?

Ailbhe Keane

Oh, wow. Okay, my phone and my iPad, so we do a lot of the digital designs. And our wardrobe was more than one thing, isn't it? But our wardrobe is such an important part. So perfect, I think our sparkly jackets collection. That's a big part of our brand today.

Claudia Winkleman

You have been so brilliant to talk to you. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Ailbhe Keane

Thank you so much, Claudia.

Claudia Winkleman

I absolutely loved talking to Ailbhe. In our next episode, I'll meet Farah Naz, as a biochemist who just couldn't find a foundation to match her olive skin. So she made one and went on to become Businesswoman of the Year. Thank you so much for joining us today for business unusual. We'd love you to rate and review the podcast and while you're there, please do subscribe to hear more from the UK as most inspirational founders in this series from Vodafone Business, goodbye.