This is Business Reimagined. Every week we talk with thought leaders and revolutionaries who are bringing innovation to their industries like today’s guest, Jason Zook.

You mentioned grit. Talk more about that.

How do I not piss a lot of people off?

Go for it. Piss a lot of people off.

First of all, if you're reading the 37 tips articles, you don't have grit.

Have you ever heard of Jason Surfer app? How about JasonHeadsets.com? Maybe Jason Sadler? Today we're talking with all of them or rather the man who is all of...
them. He goes by Jason Zook now, but his claim to fame is selling his last name on the internet and getting paid to wear company's t-shirts and telling stories about them. Now on the surface, that might seem silly or easy to dismiss, but you'd be making a mistake if you did. It's that type of thinking, the novel and unconventional, that goes viral. For Jason, it started early, and the powers that be didn't really appreciate it.

Jason

I got all the answers right on a test, but the teacher failed me because I couldn't show my work the way that you would normally show your work. My mom was like, "What's wrong here? He got the answers correct." She said, "He didn't do them the right way." She said, "Isn't the point of him to get the answers right?" My mom knew at that point as a little kid, she was like, he's going to be different. He's going to look at the world differently. He's going to answer questions differently. From that moment forward my life has always taken these weird curves and dips and these different paths in ways that I look at something, and I almost want to run the complete opposite direction because it feels more comfortable for me to do something incredibly different than anybody else and unique because inside of me I know that I'm different, and I'm unique, and that I should embrace that.

Danny

Jason didn't immediately embrace his uniqueness though. After school he worked partway up the corporate ladder in what many would consider to be a dream job, great boss, great salary, great company, and he hated it. Jason took a very scary step leaving a very generous salary to start his own design company, which immediately prospered. In fact, he seemed to do all the right things. Once again though, it became routine for Jason, and he was restless. It's not because he hated success. Instead, his inner child wanted uniqueness, to break rules, to do something different, so he did.
Episode 27

Jason

What if I sold my last name? What if I just let the internet choose my last name for a couple years until I figured out what the heck I wanted it to be? I launched a website called BuyMyLastName.com. The domain was shockingly available; everyone is going to be surprised at that. I launched it at $0. It was an auction just like an eBay auction, but I had built my own website. In the first 24 hours I had no expectations. I really had no idea. It was over $30,000 in bidding in the first 24 hours. I'm on my sixth last name. Most recently it was Jason Surfer App and then before that JasonHeadsets.com and then Jason Sadler, which is the name that most of the people who have heard of me on the internet before know me by.

Danny

Jason has had 5 last names over the course of his life though he only sold 2 of them. The others were the names he received from his mother's remarriages. None of them meant anything to him, so while he was letting the internet decide his name for a few years Jason was also searching for one that had meaning and purpose for him.

Jason

My grandmother sat me down 2 years ago, and she said, "I don't think I've ever told you much about your great grandfather," who basically passed away when I was very, very young. She said, "You're very much like him. You're very entrepreneurial. You don't like going along with conventional wisdom. You look at the world differently, and he was the same way. I think that you would probably resonate with a lot of his stories," so she told me some of his stories. Then she told me one that was really interesting is that in 1973, I believe, he won the Nikola Tesla award for his entrepreneurial work in the power industry. That was the moment that was a loud, an extremely loud ding went off in my head that was like, why not take this last name? This could be the last name that I could carry forward. Zook was his last name.
name. It had passed with him; it had not moved forward in our family. It felt like the right name for me to pick up.

Danny

Jason found his last name. He moved on from web design to the world of social media, which is interesting because Jason didn't know anything about social media when he got into it, and yet, like that kid working at problems, the wrong way to get the right answers in math classes, Jason tackled marketing in much the same way.

Jason

I've always understood that you learn more from messing up than you do from doing things right. Every single year something went wrong. The website went down; the domain didn't propagate. The payment processor didn't work. We didn't take the payment processor out of test mode. I mean, I've done all these things time and time again. In the grand scheme of things, maybe I missed out on a $2,000 or $10,000 on a launch. I know there was one specifically with my book project where I had sponsors for my book where Shopify was in test mode for the first 3 hours. I had sent it to a list of 2,000, and people were trying to buy, and they couldn't. Just at the amount of people that were emailing me, it's easy to see if 100 people were going to spend $500, that's easily $2,000 that I'm missing out on. Even though those things happened, none of them have been catastrophic. None of them have done any real damage.

If anything, again, like I said, I've just been able to say, "Now I have a really strong checklist when I do a launch for something, and I make sure that these things are knocked out." I have someone checking them as well, so I just know that they're going to work.
Danny

I have a question for you. As you move up, there's a corporate ladder. There's also a kind of entrepreneurial ladder where you've done more things, you've had more experience. You've achieved more success. As you move up that ladder, people who are lower on the ladder who are just getting started, they have a way of finding you and coming to you with questions. They're looking for advice, and guidance, and mentorship and so forth. When that happens, what's your take on advising people around risk-taking because it sounds like you've taken a good number of risks, and nothing has ever gone really, really wrong. Has that left you feeling like there's just not that much to risk? You might as well put yourself out there and give it a shot, or do you feel like I've been lucky, and I worry about somebody else not being as lucky?

Jason

This is interesting to me. I don't believe in luck. I'll rephrase that. I don't believe in luck when it comes to business. Now I believe in luck when surviving a plane crash or escaping an alligator who is chasing after you, whatever. When it comes to business I think everything can be traced back to some amount of hard work. With all the things that I have done, there's been so much hard work that have gone into them that goes unseen, or not talked about, or unnoticed because it's not sexy. I sent 5,000 emails to land 200 sponsors for my book. No one wants to send 5,000 emails or even know the strategies of how to do that because people just don't want to put in that amount of work. I'm willing to do that because I want the thing more than I'm afraid of the work, just to reframe that a little bit.

I think the other thing that you talk about when it comes to taking risks, and then people ask me about this because I do get asked about this a lot. People say, "Jason, I don't have the track record that you have, or I don't have the size audience that you have." I don't even really have that big of an audience in the grand scheme of the...
internet entrepreneur, if you will. I just look at everything through a lens of number 1, I don't want to have any regrets. I don't ever want to go back and go, "What if I just released this idea into the world?" I don't ever want to feel that way. That's the first thing. When I have a great idea, or an idea that I think is great, sorry, not that every idea I have is great, but something that I'm like, I think this is really going to work. I don't ever want to feel like, man, I missed out on that. That's the first thing.

The second thing is that it's always going to be difficult. It's always going to make you nervous, or scared, or have self-doubt. I just went through this with the project by my future. All of these feelings are so normal, but the way that I look at is that I want to do those things more than I'm afraid to do them. That to me is the powerful driving force that I think anybody can get behind whether you have kids, whether you don't have a lot of money, whether you have had 9 failed businesses, it doesn't matter. If you want the thing more than you're afraid of it, you will find a way to make it happen, but if you really don't want the thing more than you're afraid of it, if you're just so afraid, or you just really aren't that excited about it, then don't do that thing.

I think my advice for people is always to really hunker down, give an idea a little bit of time to breathe to see if it's actually something that you want to pursue and that you have the bandwidth to pursue and the time to build it and then go after it, but don't just chase every shiny object and expect it to be successful overnight because that's what we hear about in a lot of these stories in the entrepreneurial world of some overnight successes when none of them actually really are.

Every overnight success is 10 years in the making.

Danny
Jason

Exactly.

Danny

When you give that kind of advice, how do people respond to it? A lot of people are looking for what's the magic mental trick, so that just the fear won't be there, or there's an easy way to magically be confident? How do people respond?

Jason

I would love to lie to you and say, "Everybody writes back, and they're so motivated," but most people don't write back. Most people, I don't ever see them do anything with their ideas. There are a small handful that do, which makes me really excited. Those are the people that will ultimately have success whether it's with their next idea or 10 ideas later because they are willing to put in the work, and they are willing to do it. That is why I answer every email that gets sent to me. I don't have an assistant. I don't have anybody that previews my emails. I answer every single one. Whether it's a family in Mexico, this woman just emailed me a week ago. She said she has no money. She has a lot of ideas. She has a family she has to support. I wrote her back the exact same email that I wrote back a kid whose dad had a successful start-up, and he has a lot of money and just wants to try an idea. It's the same email. It's the same response. It's that you have to put in the work. You have to test something, you have to tweak it, you have to iterate. You have to build the smallest version. You have to really solve a problem, and you have to believe in what you're doing. If you can do those things, then you will have success in the craziest idea you can come up with, but you have to be willing to do it. What's funny, and you probably already can glean this from those 2 examples, the woman in Mexico is the one who has continued to respond to my emails and who has continued to update me on her progress. The Silicon Valley kid I haven't heard from since the first
reply. It's because everything comes easier to that type of person, and they're not going to want to put in the work or the effort.

You find the people who maybe are in tougher situations or just have a little bit more grit to them will put in the effort, which I do love. That's why I love emailing everybody back is because I will find the diamonds in the rough, the people who will put in the effort. It makes me so excited to then see what they've done and what they've accomplished.

**Danny**

You mentioned grit. Talk more about that.

**Jason**

How do I not piss a lot of people off?

**Danny**

Go for it. Piss a lot of people off.

**Jason**

First of all, if you're reading the 37 tips articles, you don't have grit. If you're reading the one shortcut you need to grow your audience, you don't have grit. If you're looking for a shortcut in building your business, you don't have grit. You need to be able to dig in and say, "No matter what anybody else has done in the thing I'm trying to do, my set of circumstances are so different that all of those articles combined are not going to bring me the same success that those people have had." To rephrase that a different way, I think too many people read stories of other successful entrepreneurs, myself included, and they say, "If I just retrace every step you took, could I have the same success?" No. Even if you have the same grit and fight and everything else, it's context. It's so many variables that you just can't control that you just have no ability to make it all come together the same way.
I think that everybody needs their own edge. I think everybody needs their own uniqueness that they put out into the world, and that they also have a thick skin about. When they say, "This is the thing I stand for," whether it's weird, or crazy or whatever, if people don't get behind that, then you have thick enough skin, and you have the grit and the motivation to say, "Then you're not one of my people." As my friend Paul Jarvis says, "You're not one of my rad people." I'm going to keep moving forward because you just don't fit with what I'm trying to do. We all have this thing that we want to be liked, but I think some of us care about being liked less than other people. Those are the people that you tend to see are a little bit more successful because they just don't get wrapped up in that.

Danny

Is there the other extreme where you're so gritty that you're chasing down basically a delusion for a decade? Where do you draw the line?

Jason

You're probably right. I think that there are some people who don't see the writing on the wall. I would even admit that I got close to that. I carried I Wear Your Shirt forward for 5 years. In the last year of it, it just wasn't going well. I think I Wear Your Shirt really grabbed its moment in time in social media, but I think that the decisions I made because I didn't have a lot of experience running a business like that, the people that I hired, anything that I was doing, the companies we were working with, they just led to a downfall. I kept saying, "I can just get through this. Let me come up with the next thing for this. Let me pour a little bit more money into it from my savings or from my family. It will work itself out." Eventually I got to the point where I had $100,000 in debt, and that was my line. That was my line in the sand.
For myself, and I don't know what it takes for other people, when I got to that line, I drew that line. I said, "This is it. I can't go any further. I can't get into any more debt for this business. I can't continue to fight for it. I have to walk away, and I'll think of something else. I'll create something else, but I need to take a step back and learn what got me to this point with this business, so that I can move forward with my next business and not repeat those mistakes."

This is fascinating to me because 5 minutes ago I asked you if you've ever had something mess up to the point where it was really bad. You were like, "No, no, not really." I mean, you're telling me now that $100,000 in debt. That's not nothing. Where would you draw the line and call it really damaging, really bad?

When I think catastrophic or damaging, I think in a moment or in a short period of time. The getting $100,000 in debt didn't happen overnight. It didn't happen in a month. It didn't happen in 6 months. It happened in a long period of time. It definitely felt catastrophic when it got to that line, but it never felt like that was a catastrophic thing, if that makes sense. I think when I got to that point it was that I realized enough was enough, and that I was moving on, not necessarily in that I made one mistake or a couple mistakes that I could point to this. It was just a conglomeration of a lot the things that didn't quite work out that led me to that point.

I'm trying to think how to phrase the question.

How did I get out of $100,000 in debt?
Danny

No. I've had my own similar experiences. I know how that goes. There is a snowball effect thing. As things pick up, and pick up, and pick up it gets easier, and easier, and easier. I'm thinking more about the pivoting and the regroup. You've got $100,000 in debt. You decide I'm going to shut down this thing. I'm not going to keep it going for another year. When you're an entrepreneur, and you're doing something like that, especially something that you become so known for, you're letting go a piece of your identity. What was that transition like? Did you just wake up one morning, I'm doing something else now, or do you have to put it aside? Do you have to give yourself some time to recharge? What was the transition like?

Jason

Scary, man. It was definitely probably the hardest time in my life was walking away from something that I had spent so many years building, and I invested so much time into. I want to go back really quick because I just want to address the point that you made that you've been through something similar. I think that this is something that so many people deal with, getting into debt, having a business that doesn't work out. Here's what makes it different for those of us that get through it and those of us don't. I talked about it publicly. I admitted it to my family and my friends. Many people do not do that. Many people are too prideful. They're too just hard-headed. They're too embarrassed, and they won't admit it. What you realize is that if you have a good group of people around you, when you admit something like this to them they're not going to point their fingers and laugh at you, which I think is what we're all afraid of when we get to these points, and that you're going to feel embarrassed.

What you find is that if you have a good group of people around you, and you share this down moment that you're in, all they want to do is help get you out of it. The
conversations shift from you thinking they're going to be finger pointing and embarrassment to support and love. Jason, you got to this point, you're here now. You can't dwell on it. Let's get you out of it. How do we get you out of it? Those were the conversations for me that started happening when I finally admitted this publicly. Now I did it a little bit more publicly than most people would. I did it on stage at a conference in front of about 150 people at a very small gathering of people in North Dakota at a really cool conference where I was supposed to be telling my success story.

That was the moment when I got up on stage, and I said, "I'm not going to lie to these people, and I'm not going to lie to myself anymore." Here's actually what's going on and what I've gotten myself into. The outpouring of support from that moment has been just so pivotal in my life because it has shown me that you shouldn't be embarrassed by these things, and that you shouldn't dwell on them. You shouldn't let them fester or grow or snowball like you said. You should bring them out to the people that you trust and love and let them help you get through it.

Danny

That's really powerful. I didn't connect those dots. I was also quite public. The people in my circles knew what was going on. I've since been very public about it. My audience, my community knows a lot about my story. Something that I found about that experience is that part of it is just acknowledging it for what it is, but a big part of what makes it difficult is that we've always got to cling to some picture of self-worth, of how this happened, but we're still okay. We have an internal narrative. As I was saying before, hindsight makes things look very premeditated. We tell a story about how event A led to event B, led to event C, led to where we are today. Where we are today being the climax of the story. If you were doing really well, but now
you're not, it changes your whole story from a comedy to a tragedy. When you start telling people what's going on, it forces you to abandon the old narrative that just now has a different ending and start looking at the story differently, so you can actually start moving on.

Jason

I think that's an incredibly important way to look at it, and also for people who might be listening to this who are in the place that we were in, it's okay. Number 1, it's money, which is a completely made up thing in our society, and we put so much pressure on ourselves to make more of it, and to grow, and do all these things, and that's ridiculous. The second thing too is that this didn't happen overnight. You're not going to get out of it overnight, but that's okay as well. Now you set yourself up on a new path. You set yourself up with new ideas and thoughts and ways of looking at things. For me, that was, what am I spending all my money on every month? I found that I was just spending money on eating out, and that habit formed from I was overworking myself, and I was so stressed out that I didn't want to cook any healthy meals. I just wanted to go eat something quick, and that led to me gaining a lot of weight. That led to me not sleeping very well. That led to me having a poor self-image, as well as a poor mental self-image.

All these little things, that if I could tweak and change some of those habits, I could really change everything about the way that I was feeling and the way things were going. The beautiful thing is that when you start to do that, for me, especially as someone who just comes up with ideas like crazy is I stopped coming up with ideas when I was in that down time. Now I'm coming up with ideas rapid fire. I can't stop coming up with ideas because I've given fuel to the right engines that I have going. I've refocused my life in a way where I'm now set up to be successful, as successful as
I can, I think, with the way that I live my life and the decisions that I make on a day to day basis.

Danny

I think you touched on something really important here in that life is not compartmentalized. It's not like life is perfect on every dimension except that you're $100,000 in debt or $250,000 as so was the case for me. It's not that everything is perfect except for that one thing. There's a co-morbidity that goes with it. You're getting into all this debt, which means you're super stressed, which means you're not taking the time to exercise or to sleep enough, which means your health is suffering, which is affecting your ability to make good decisions. It's a negative circle in all of the pieces of your life that makes it very, very hard for you to really do anything, to take any kind of corrective action. When you start making positive changes, every positive change you make proportionally reduces the load of everything else. It creates a positive snowball, as you start dealing with things.

For someone who is in that position, and everything does tend to come together. You're not eating properly; you're not sleeping enough. You're not exercising, you're working too much. You're stressed, your relationships are taking the brunt. You're not doing well at work, all of it comes together. What's the first domino? What would you focus on fixing first?

Jason

What really did it for me was finding someone that I trusted and knew well enough that had some life experience. They had been through something like this before, not specifically what I was going through but just through a down time of some sort that I could talk to, and that I could just basically say, "Let me bear all of this to you because I trust that you're going to just take it for what it's worth, and you're not going to point a finger and laugh at me." Then what will that person say back to me
and be open to what they have to say back to you. For me, that was my friend who is an author, Pamela Slim. I got on a Skype call with her because she came up to me after that talk. She was at that talk when I bared my soul, and she gave me a big hug. She said, "I'm here for you. Whatever you need, let's chat. I've been in this position before," obviously different circumstances.

It took me 8 months to gather the courage to reach out to her because again, I was so proud. I was so prideful. I was so embarrassed. I had already had told the story of what I was doing, but even then I was still just fighting it. I want to say that because it is a very tough decision to make. It hopefully takes the people who are listening to this who need to do that way less time than it took me, but it's okay if it takes you more time because you have to do it yourself. The first thing is again, to bare your soul to that person, so that they can then tell you what they've been through, and they can relate it to your situation. Then your situation won't look so crazy dire, and it won't look like the end of the world. It won't look like you're the only person who's experienced this because our minds do that to us. They tell us, "Jason, this is the worst experience anyone has ever had in their entire life, and you have to go through it by yourself," and that's not true. It's not true at all.

That's the first step, which is probably the biggest step because everything after that then just becomes the tactics, then just becomes the little things you can do every day to make the shifts and the changes, like you said, because things aren't compartmentalized although you do need to make changes in the different compartments to have the whole thing get fixed.

Danny

Jason, this has been a fantastic conversation. We've gone down a lot of alleys and paths that I didn't expect us to, which often that's what happens with the most
interesting conversations. I'm always looking for just what is the thread that ties the whole conversation together. The theme of the show is Business Reimagined. This is really interesting to me. I really thought that where this conversation would go is all the ways that you're reimagining social media with I Wear Your T–Shirt, and selling your last name, and what you're doing with BuyMyFuture and all these other things that you're doing. What's emerging for me is a really reimagined conception of risk consequences and the overall trajectory of a business career. Is that jiving for you?

**Jason**

Totally. I think that I've only been able to do the things that I've done that are the interesting stories that people want to read about because I've reinvented my life, because I've really looked at my core values, because I've dug into a lot of this personal stuff, and I've made some tough calls and some tough changes and done some things that are really uncomfortable. I think that to have success in business, you have to do those things. I don't think there's anybody who has not gone through those things that is really successful. If they have, then they're just lying to you because I just wouldn't believe it. I think there's just so much that happens, especially as an entrepreneur that you have to deal with. I really dig that. I think that's a great way to encapsulate everything and tie it together.

**Danny**

Awesome. I'm thrilled with this conversation. I think we have a lot of really great material, and I'm excited to see how the episode is going to pull together finally. Is there anything that I should have asked you but didn't? Is there anything that you want us to talk about?

**Jason**

No. I think the only other thing that has really shined a light on my life for me is the idea that you don't get what you don't ask for. I have just been willing to ask for so many crazy things in my life whether it's people to pay me to wear t–shirts, or to buy
my last name, or to sponsor my book, or to purchase my future. All of these things, I would not get them if I didn't ask for them. You can't just put them up and hope people find them. I think that that one thought for me has been reinforced as a successful thought and a successful guiding principle that you just have to, if you really want to build something unique or different or just have success, you have to be able to make the tough asks and a lot of asks and just see what comes of it and be okay with the fact that you're going to hear no, and you're going to get challenged, and that people aren't going to like the thing that you're doing.

Again, if you want that thing more than you're afraid of it, you should go out and ask for it, and you should keep asking for it until you get it because otherwise it's probably not something you should be spending your time on, and you should move onto something else.

That was Jason Zook, reimagining the path to success starting at the very beginning by being open to new possibilities and not dismissing things just because the might seem a little out there. Instead, if you've got an idea that you're excited about and believe in, then don't shy away just because you're afraid someone might say no. Instead, ask, and you might be surprised with the answer. To learn more about Jason's work, visit JasonDoesStuff.com. Remember, he answers every email, so think about reaching out. If you do, tell him Danny said, "Hi."

I actually structured this entire book around this concept of the hero's journey with a lot of the nerdy metaphors that I love. I looked at it as I'm the mentor, the book is the
call to action and the reader is the hero in that story. The book takes them through the 12, 13 major steps of a hero's journey and encourages them to start looking at their life through that lens as well.

Voiceover: Learn more about us at Mirasee.com.