

Ethan:

Hey, everyone, and welcome to the Startup Savants podcast, the podcast dedicated to helping aspiring entrepreneurs and startup enthusiasts by bringing you news, insights, and stories about the startups and founders that are making waves right now. Today, our guest is Sabrina Noorani. Sabrina, how are you doing today?

Sabrina:

I'm awesome. Happy Monday, everyone.

Annaka:

Happy Monday to you. So, if you could, tell us a little bit about the history behind your business, ClearForMe and a little bit about the mission as well.

Sabrina:

Yeah, definitely. So, ClearForMe is a technology company. We are a SaaS platform that beauty brands and retailers use to help provide ingredient transparency, education, and search capabilities to their customers. And funny enough, I don't come from a beauty background. So, I'm not a beauty aficionado. I actually come from a data background. I was a derivatives trader on Wall Street. So, a total different line of work.

But I came at this because I'm a consumer. As a consumer, I face a really out of the blue crazy situation that forced me into this. So, years ago, I developed skin allergies around my lips. They started to puff up and peel so much that I was getting Staph infections on a weekly basis. Yeah, Staph infections. So, it was definitely a fun [redacted] moment of what ... what do I do? How do I tackle this thing?

And so, I tapped into the experience as a consumer that when I was shopping for products online or in store, and I was just trying to get educated or just learn more about products or ingredients, particularly, I could never pick up a product either in a store or online and just look at the product and say, "Hey, what is this? What does this ingredient do? How do I find something without this, or how do I find something with this?"

Sabrina:

And the key problem in our industry is that there is no standard for how ingredients are labeled.

Annaka:

Right

Sabrina:

So, it sounds really simple, but that's a key problem because something as basic as vitamin C, which has great anti-aging properties and it does great things for your skin has 35 different synonyms that are used in ingredient labels for vitamin C, salicylic acid 12, water and its water has 60 different ways that it can be labeled.

Sabrina:

So, it just shows you the depth of this problem affects every single ingredient that you read on any ingredient list. And so, that's the why behind ClearForMe, is to help transform the way consumers consume ingredient information so that we can make decisions, empowered decisions really wherever we're shopping for products.

Annaka:

Wow. That is very, very cool. And so, coming from a completely different background, personal events that happened to you are kind of what gave you the idea to get your company moving. Am I correct in that?

Sabrina:

100 percent. I mean, that situation with my lips, I'm one of the only female traders on a hedge fund floor. I had this thing going on with my lips, so I was you know traveling the subways and tight close quarters with people in New York City.

I had my then fiancé and I was planning my wedding and I was also just navigating what anyone, any I think other girls in their late 20s was trying to do at that point where you're going out a little bit, you're social, you're working, and you have this thing going on with your skin that's just so intense and so like ... you see it you know? Every time I took a bite of food, I felt it. Every time I talk to somebody, I was conscious of it. So, it started to permeate really on my core around my confidence and just feeling like how do I get behind this.

I was obviously motivated to figure out and try to change my lifestyle. But, the idea that I learned I needed to avoid fragrance and a few other ingredients and I thought I got this. I can avoid four ingredients. And it wasn't that simple. It was the fact that for formaldehyde, I had to know 12 different names for it, for fragrance, 32 different names for it.

And that's not just for your lip products. It's for your cleanser. It's for your makeup. It's for your cleaning products, your shampoo. Because all of these things, somehow, if you don't know, it affects you. You touch your hands and touch your mouth or your face or your shampoo will roll down your face.

So, there's a lot of things that it could be. And it was just this really intense experience around feeling disempowered, feeling like I couldn't actually act on information even though I had decided ... I did the research and I figured out what to do, there was no way for me to actually execute on that. And that was very frustrating. And I can imagine it is for any consumer that's trying to get more educated. It's trying to make smarter choices, but it's so confusing out there and it's so overwhelming. And it shouldn't be.

It's as simple as products have ingredient lists. Ingredient lists have different synonyms. That information should be so simple, so that anyone can be like, "What is this? What does this do?" Okay, for me, I'm okay with that decision. Or for me, I'm not. I don't want this. I don't want this and I want to try something else.

Annaka:

Right. Or like a different set of ingredients. Yeah.

Sabrina:

Yeah.

Ethan:

So, you were obviously an n of 1. You created this product. I'm assuming kind of to scratch your own itch, which is great. But how did you validate your startup idea to the wider market?

Sabrina:

Yeah, it's a good question. So, when I started, I thought, "Okay, this is a problem that really will only affect people that have skin allergies or really intense skin issues like eczema and dermatitis and allergies." And I thought, "This is the problem I'm going to solve for and this is my customer segment."

And I quickly realized, as I started to go down that path is that when I was talking to my friends and sharing this idea, all my friends, while they didn't have like severe allergies or they didn't have something that they were going to a dermatologist for, everyone was dealing with something for their skin. And so, it was like, "Well, what do I do about the fact that I have acne? Or how do I make sure that I'm using the right ingredients for my oily skin."

And so, I started to recognize that this is a problem in terms of everyone is dealing with something for their skin, and we all are in different seasons of our lives, whether the time I was getting married, and then later became pregnant and had kids. There's different things that we all are dealing with in our lives and making smart decisions affects us all. So that was one, just being able to understand that I can zoom out on this problem a lot more than I thought I did in the beginning.

And then, the second was starting to look at, okay, the beauty industry is a \$500 billion industry. So, clearly, there's a market of people shopping and discovering products and always trying to find things that are a fit for them. And on the flip side, the brands and retailers are innovating and creating new products all the time because there are needs. There's so many various needs for different consumers.

So, that was the aha moment where if we could create a platform to make it easier to find products, but have it live where customers shop was what started sounding exciting to me. And then it came down to as simple as it sounds cliché, but it came down to validating it by trying to find a paying customer. Finding your first customer that's willing to pay you for your solution.

And for me, when I realized I wanted to live where customers shop, I targeted retailers and I graciously stocked a few and just started to get in front of the right people that I thought were innovators in the space. And one of those was Annie Jackson at Credo Beauty, who's the

cofounder and COO of Credo, which is now obviously, a very large, clean beauties ... they're the largest clean beauty retailer in the world. They are just at the forefront of this.

But at the time, they had just gotten started, and I was just obsessed with them. And I really tried to get the meeting. And once I got in front of her by my fourth or fifth attempt, she said, "You know what, let's have a meeting." And she listened.

And once I went through that process and sold her my vision, sold her what we were building and what we could do, and she was like, "This makes so much sense. We want to do this with you." And that was the start. But to be honest, it's like the first paying customer you get that and then you need the second paying customer. So, it's not just one right? You've got to keep going to keep validating the product and the solution, which is the journey I'm on right now.

Ethan:

So, you said you reached out four or five times before she even took that meeting. So, was there something in that first meeting that really kind of set it in stone for you that, "Hey, this is going to work?" Or was it when she accepted the meeting? Or was it the end of the meeting? What was it about that meeting that really made the big change for you?

Sabrina:

The big thing about this meeting that made the change for me was a mindset shift. So, I had kind of had this idea around, I wanted to find this retail customer. And when you're in a startup, there's so many different parts of your business you're working on. You're trying to find your customer, but you also want to make sure your product is set up. You want to make sure that you have your logo on your site set up, little nuanced things.

And I was working for months in 2019. And I was working and I was doing a little bit of sales or doing a little bit of other things. And I was working all the time, but I didn't find that I was moving anywhere. And finally, by that summer, I was like, "You know what, I'm setting this goal. By the end of this year, if I don't get a paying retail customer, then I know I need to pivot, and I need to ... I maybe this isn't the right model or I would find something else to do."

And I think that mindset shift was key because I basically said, by creating that mindset, I decluttered everything else on my list. I stopped doing the other things and prioritized just sales, which is the scary part. Because you're cold emailing. You're touching base with the same person over and over and over. But it gave me the confidence like I have nothing to lose. I'm going to ping her. And I started to listen to things around. Like when you email somebody, you're the 17th most important thing on their list. And that's just because not that they are ignoring you or what you're saying is invaluable. It's just that everyone's busy.

So, it gave me the confidence to just keep pinging and trying new things and you know trying different things. And I think that was the key thing, is once I had that mindset and I finally got the meeting, I was like, "This is my shot." And so, I just went all in and you prepare the heck out of that meeting. And I pitched and she's like, "Okay, we want to have a second meeting with the

broader team." And I got the whole team on Zoom and just watching it on video. And I pitched then. And then it kind of went from there.

But really, I think the key thing is the mindset and realizing that you need to actually close this client. And it sounds so simple. And it's not because it's so hard as an entrepreneur. And it's so challenging when you're trying to find that customer, you're trying to really like put yourself out there. And that's the only thing you're supposed to be doing as an entrepreneur is getting that sale. But it's, to be honest, very hard to put yourself in that position. And it's a little bit easier to focus on the other stuff of the business right? Because it all has to get done. It's just, that was the key thing for me.

Annaka:

Yeah, that calling and connecting can be kind of an anxiety thing. Like, "Oh, wow, I have to put myself out there, and I have to know how this works and how it benefits." But man, what an experience to get a first client on. That's got to feel amazing. And a big portion of your platform is API. Am I right there?

Sabrina:

So, what does that mean?

Annaka:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, what does it stand for and what does it do?

Sabrina:

Yeah. An API is an application programming interface. But essentially, as I mentioned, we are an ingredient platform. So, I'll start there first. So, what we have as an ingredient database. We have 1.3 million ingredients in our database. And what we're doing is solving that problem of standardization is we're standardizing those ingredients to one central standard ingredient name, or whatever that name is.

So, for example, persea gratissima oil is avocado oil. And so, being able to connect all the different ways that an ingredient is labeled as avocado, connecting it to the fact that this is avocado oil, and then we store fact-based information about avocado oil, like what are the synonyms for it? What are the functions? And by functions, like isn't avocado oil put in a formula because it's an emollient, i.e., it helps the skin retain moisture, or does it do other things? So, we store all this information about avocado oil and all the other ingredients in our database.

And then we package some of that into simple one to two sentence user-friendly definitions explaining what this is. So, how brands like our retailer like Credo and brands that use our platform use us is through an API. So, what happens is, when a product page loads on their site, there's an API call so essentially like not a phone call, but like an internet call essentially, like if you want to simplify it to say, "Hey ClearForMe, give us the definition for avocado oil." And so, we provide that data.

And the reason we can do this because we know when the site says persea gratissima oil, we know that's avocado oil. And we connect it back to the definition of avocado and other capabilities like we want to find things with avocado or we want to find things without, we provide that data to them through APIs. Yeah.

Ethan:

Gotcha. So, you mentioned the database. The database attached to the API really is the product. How did you build your database? And where did you get that information? Because obviously, if you're just scouring the web for data, you're probably going to find a lot of bad information. So, how did you build the database? And where do you get your data?

Sabrina:

Great question. I mean, we build our database through our partners. So, we start to build that we need avocado oil, for example, because Credo's products have avocado oil in their products, for example. So, all of our products and ingredient data is not ... there's no scraping. It comes directly from our brands and retailers, which is very important to us, so that we are getting the ingredient list directly from the horse's mouth so to speak. It's coming from the brands directly or the retailers that are working with these brand partners, so that data comes directly from them.

So, that's step one, which is a key thing around having the right ingredient information. And working with those partners directly (to) make sure that they're the ones that are managing and updating that information. So, formulations change or there's new skews, that's where that data comes from. So, that's step one is having that information.

Now step two, in terms of having the information that we populate our database from, because we are an independent platform, because we just store the facts, it sounds simple, but there are only so many chemical synonyms for avocado. We're just aggregating that, those fact-based information. So, it comes from sources like the National Institute of Health or functions of ingredients come from sources, like the European Commission, or the Personal Care Products Council. And so, we have accredited journals and resources that provide those facts. We're aggregating that information.

And then the definitions, of course, are like a one to two sentence definition is proprietary that we compile based on the data that we start to populate with our data. And then, once we populate that with our database, we connect it with the step one part of the ingredient list and the standardized forms of those ingredients, and then marry that information, so we can provide search capabilities around that.

Annaka:

That is just wild and 1.3 million things, ingredients in that database, I would have never thought that there were that many things that could go into skincare. That's insane. So, when it comes to, I know, there are some trickier ingredients out there. One that I think a lot of people are familiar with is fragrance. I mean, how do you handle something like that because it's in pretty much everything at this point?

Sabrina:

And fragrance is a tricky one because fragrance is not a chemical of its own. Fragrance is a mix of chemicals. So, that's why it's not as simple as water or shea butter or avocado oil. I'll stop using avocados. I'm sure everyone on this podcast is like, "All right, stop with the avocado," I get it. But fragrance is the tricky one. And yet it's also the most common one, to your point. It's true. So, fragrance is tricky because it's a mix of ingredients. So, how we treat it is that it's a mix of scent ingredients.

So, we work with brands who are transparent around what is the components of their fragrances. And if that's the case, and we are able to provide the search capabilities for if somebody were to say, "Hey, I want a fragrant, but without shea butter, for example," we can provide the results for brands that do provide full transparency of the fragrance components.

But if they don't provide transparency, even if an ingredient that has fragrance might not have shea butter, we do not provide that in the search results. And that's because we don't know. If we don't know what's the actual component of the fragrance, then when the search results are happening around, hey, does this have alcohol in it, or does this have this fragrant component of it, we assume that it does because we have to make that assumption.

So, I think over time and Credo is actually a great example as they launched like a fragrance disclosure campaign almost two years ago now around just that, having their brands empowered to be able to choose, be able to disclose it, and if they not disclose it, at least disclose attributes around it. Is it only made of essential oils? Or what are the different fragrance components, types of components?

And so, I think that over time is obviously changing, which is great for consumers because not all fragrances are bad. It's just a matter of like, what are they made of, which is the big question mark. And how can we make that more transparent so that consumers can make the decision for them. Like, this is a type of fragrance I am okay with or I do want or vice versa, I don't want.

Annaka:

Yeah. I know that there are a couple ingredients out there where things get a little bit murky. So, that was a really great explanation. And then, I promise I'll stop talking about ingredients soon Ethan. But when it comes to kind of trends and what you see in the consumer market, how does that guide data collection? Do you get ahead of trends? Or do you just kind of keep an eye on what people are interested in and add things to your database as you go?

Sabrina:

Yeah, so trends are an amazing piece of data. It's how people can understand what to look for, how they can discover new things. So, it's always fun to know what are the trends or what were the trends. And what's really great about ClearForMe's database is that we have a unique perspective and a unique data set around what are the trends based on what consumers are searching for. It's not just Googling, "Hey, does this product have retinol or hyaluronic acid?"

We're actually seeing what are they actually doing? Are they clicking on this ingredient? Are they saying, "I want a serum with this ingredient and without."

And that's data we're getting directly from the customer base. So, for us, we're able to track and identify ingredient and product trends. And I think that that gives us the ability to give our retailers and brand partners the ability to use ClearForMe as an insider advantage in terms of being able to connect more to their customer base. One of our partners, we found that one of the ingredients, while you know you always learn about the top five ingredients customers search for in the winter time, things that are more nourishing, for example.

But it was interesting to learn that, hey, one of the top 50 ingredients that had a lot of clicks was ethylhexylglycerin, which is ... exactly! Everyone has that face — like what's ethylhexylglycerin?

Annaka:
Exactly.

Sabrina:
And you realize, it's used as a preservative and it's used in clean beauty. It's not something that sounds as scary as it is. But it gave us an information that customers want to know more about it. And it is found in some shampoos. And so, the partner we worked with used that information to then create a small marketing, email marketing campaign, around educating about this ingredient. What it is, and what are the few ingredients, what are the few products in their inventory that have this.

So, it's another access point to be able to just educate in a fun way, in a way that disarms the wall, I think, that naturally comes up when we read an ingredient that's not as simple as layman's terms. And it just is an access point to talk to customers about.

So, trends are definitely something that we are tracking, are developing like roadmaps for [and] are working really closely with our partners around how they can use the data around what their customers are most engaged with or want to learn most about, so that they could either source new products in terms of merchandising it or just highlight the current inventory in a different way versus top five trends of summer or top five trends of winter.

We all know, we're going to get marketed the same thing. But how do we actually change the conversation and add new dimensions around ingredient education and transparency that is fun for customers. Because I don't know, I like to geek out. I love to learn different things. And it's like, that stuff will stay with me more than sometimes learning about retinol or things that I know about, but it's always good to learn about. So, I think that's something that is a big advantage I think of how we structured our database.

And so, to your point around early on the technology, API side. So, we know from a data driven way what customers are engaging with, what they're shopping by. And we can package that and provide that insight to our partners.

Annaka:

Yeah, I love it. Any consumer informed decision and marketing is ... love it.

Ethan:

Absolutely. And yeah, you're 100% right about there being kind of a barrier there. When you said, I don't even remember what the name of the ingredient you just said there.

Sabrina:

Ethylhexylglycerin.

Ethan:

Yeah, exactly, exactly. For me, I say do I rub that on my face and then my face explodes or I mean, I have no idea. So, thank you very much for providing that transparency into the market. I don't use a lot of skin products. But I know there are a lot of people that do. So, it sounds like this is something that's needed to be around for a long time.

Sabrina:

Yeah and I think there's a lot of great resources out there that provide, "Hey, this is good or this is bad," if you are part of this, if you want to be really strict around what ingredients you're using or you're really sensitive to this or there's this health issue that's going on. And I think there's amazing resources out there.

How ClearForMe is different is that we just want to provide the facts. We just want to disarm this notion that everything sounds scary and so that we should avoid everything or everything is okay, and we should use everything. It's all really about just disarming you. At the end of the day, we all just want to know that these ingredients that we're reading aren't as scary as they sound. And we want to just be able to understand the facts so that we can then make the decision for ourselves.

And it's okay, whatever the decision is. It's just about providing that data in a user-friendly way, that's bite size that you can process and make a quick decision versus going down the fun Google rabbit hole that we all have been on when we're like, "What's going on? Should we do this?" And then next thing you know, you want to avoid water. Water is toxic, too. It's not about that. At the end of the day, sometimes there are some cleaner waters and not. And the point is just really everyone needs information. And everyone should have access to information so they can make that decision. And that's the key thing about what our position is.

And the role that we want to play in the industry is to provide that leadership around transparent information. And that way, customers and retailers and brands can provide the elevated service that they should be providing to their customers that they want to provide and that customers on the flip side want to receive because we're overwhelmed. There's so much things. There's so much out there and so much information, like who's the right place? And what's the right

resource? And how do I make the right decision for myself? It's hard and it shouldn't be and I don't want it to be. Yeah.

Annaka:

Yeah, I love it. Give me all of the information and keep me from being on WebMD at 2:00 in the morning, please and thank you. Talking a bit, you're mentioning transparency and being a leader in this market, how does that influence your company culture? How do you kind of grow that within your own company and your own staff?

Sabrina:

Oh man, that's a really good one. And we are a team that's grown like three fold in the last year. So, it's a challenge. But what I've learned from my time as a trader and kind of being on the outside in always as like an immigrant coming into the states and as one of the only female traders on the floor in my company that I worked with is it's so important, it sounds cheesy, but this philosophy of like one team one dream. Everyone is so important on the team.

And it's so needed. Everyone contributes in different ways. And I think that for us creating this awareness as a team, as a leadership even whoever's not on the leadership on our team just needs to know that we all are making a contribution — everyone can bring something in a different perspective. And so, for us, building, our culture is really rooted in this great, fun, cheesy line of one team one dream. Like we are sharing this dream to change the way the world is consuming and reading information. And we're on this journey together.

Who knows where this is going to take us? We have goals. But as you know, life takes you wherever it wants to take you. And it has. And we're along for this ride together on this dream. And there's no way that I have a large percentage of why we are where we are. It's because of our team. It's because of everyone stepping in and seeing opportunities and identifying it and also seeing the problems and calling them out and seeing our failures and calling those out.

So, for us, we're still figuring it out. But that's, I think, like a key value prop of our culture is building off that. We're together. We're one team. It's a flat structure. And that's what's exciting. And I love it. And I'm just going to continue to hope that my team does as well as we grow.

Ethan:

You said flat culture.

Annaka:

Yes.

Ethan:

I want you to tell us more. I want you to tell us more about your flat structure.

Annaka:

Yes, please.

Sabrina:

It sounds really simple, but it's just rooted in this idea that the titles don't mean anything. And I think it's this notion that everyone is contributing something. They're learning different things and I'm meeting with everyone on my team from interns to managers to leadership, and that's how it should be. Because if we're having this like vertical structure in our business, I've seen it before when I was an analyst and then a trader on my other teams where my leadership they're so removed from how the customers are talking to us or what they need.

And then, how can I be expected as a CEO to make strategic decisions about the business if I'm not in the weeds at times or I'm not understanding the customer problems. And vice versa, how can our team help our customers when they don't know where our product is going? Or where our strategic roadmap is outlined to take us to over the next year or three years or five years. And so, that's really what I mean when I say flat structure is the ability that we're all connecting together.

We have daily meetings every morning, where we're talking about what we're all working on. I'm just as accountable to the things I'm working on that day as everyone on the team and I share that with everybody and same vice versa. They're all accountable to me as well. And it's a shared responsibility and role. And I think that that's been really important for us and it's helped us stay connected.

Ethan:

Do you feel like your team is going to be able to scale to the levels that you want? As a long-term vision, do you think you'll be able to keep the flat structure? Or do you think at some point that there will have to be, for lack of a better term, levels put into that structure?

Sabrina:

I'd be naive to say it's going to stay flat. We've already grown three fold as I mentioned. And we're on the path to continue on that trajectory. And I think that, you know, that might change, but I think what's important and what's my job is to make sure the culture of that ethos stays and it permeates, whether it's group meetings or siloed meetings within divisions that might be working together in that same flat structure, and then potentially having as you mentioned, levels, especially as we scale and really grow.

But, again, I think it's just like the leadership's job to make sure that that's part of what's really important and how it'll help inform how we structure our group meetings or things like that in the future.

Ethan:

Awesome, thank you.

Annaka:

I love it. I love it. It's kind of a different approach than corporate structure has been in the last 50 years, so I love to hear about that. And to skip around just a touch, how was the jump from finance into kind of skincare and beauty? How did that feel for you to go from something that you were obviously good at and kind of proven track record into the unknown void?

Sabrina:

You know, I imagine all entrepreneurs have gone through this. But I feel like for me, and I can speak to my own journey, it was one of the hardest jumps I've done or the hardest move I've made in my career. But I think it was because of the fact that it was something so nontraditional. I grew up as an immigrant, as I mentioned. And in the Indian community, it's like you're going to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a business person. I knew I didn't want to be the first two. So, I chose going to business school, because that was the default option. And I hadn't really spent time thinking about what was inspiring or what really drove my passion.

So, for me when I switched from finance, and I was like, "Okay, I'm thinking about, I'm going to take some time to really explore. If I don't go back, what is it that I could really spend my time doing?" And at the time I was dealing with this skin issue. And I was just like, it took over my life for periods of time. And this problem with my lips went on for years. So, it wasn't something that was like a few months of a really serious thing. I really embodied this for years. I really tried to get to the bottom of this and navigated this for a long time.

And I think in that journey it gave me the confidence that this was a problem that was just so big for me that I had to figure out how to solve it. And maybe that gave me the naive like faith that, hey, I can make a business out of this in some sense. But, it's challenging, and I think it's challenging because when you're creating a business, you're starting from scratch and you have to do everything from scratch and getting that first revenue took ages.

And mine isn't an overnight success where I built this platform, had this idea, and got my first customer in two months and then we're on the road to 300 partners. No, that took a long time and it took a lot of different journeys and ways to figure out like, how do I set myself up? How do I structure my time? How do I figure out what to go after? And as I mentioned earlier, having that moment where I was like, you know what, I need to just shift perspective. This needs to be like a defined goal that's measurable, that gives me some sort of output, that gives me the confidence to say, "Keep going."

Whereas I kind of was just struggling along, I think that was where things really shifted for me. To be able to say, "Hey, I'm gonna have this going and I'm going to find a customer and I'm going to have that customer pay me and I'm going to go through that process." It's about building those little moments of confidence. And I think that's the key to success as an entrepreneur is keeping your confidence up.

And once I started to notice that, okay, this gave me this confidence. Okay, from here and now, I was like, "Oh, my god, I have to create my first SOW," and all these different terms that you learn, but once you keep doing a little bit, you start to like, "Okay, I could do this." And now,

things don't seem scarier. And so, I think that was the key takeaway for me is figuring out that I needed to keep doing things to build my confidence.

And for me, what did that mean? And it means different things to different people. But once I got that going, that's given me the legs to really sustain like a business that's really growing and scaling a lot. And now, we take on new challenges. I'm scared all the time. But, it's less scary in a way because I'm not in my head as much about it. I can just dive in. And what's the worst that can happen?

Ethan:

Right, right. So, talking about the beginning of your startup career for ClearForMe, you were part of a startup accelerator program. What did that program do for you? What did it do for your company? And it sounds to me like mindset is a huge part of your life as a founder. How did that experience help and change your mindset?

Sabrina:

So, I did a program called the Founder Institute, and the accelerator is a little bit unique compared to other accelerators in that it's an idea-stage accelerator. So, you just go in with an idea. Your business does not have to be built out or you don't have to have any paying customers. You come in with ideas. And the premise is you actually come in with three ideas and you work through the process to be able to figure out is there one ... You test the viability of it. You pitch it. You kind of go through this whole iteration of it. And it's like a three or four month program, if I'm not mistaken.

But that program was essentially teaching me what I don't think clicked for me until afterwards is this idea of key milestones — just get it done. It's not about knowing everything, but draw a line in the sand for as much as you can and then just test it and just keep pushing it. And so, one was learning that.

The second was this idea that every week, we had to pitch. Obviously, at the beginning of the whole accelerator, I didn't really know what my model was going to be, and I didn't know what my customer base was going to be. And I didn't even know how big the market was. You kind of know these general things. But this idea that every week, I have to do a three to five minute pitch, have it memorized, have it iterated on, and then have three mentors who were there and visiting every week who were investors or entrepreneurs, or people that were in the industry that could just give you feedback.

And sometimes you're stuttering and sometimes you freeze, and then you go to start your pitch again, but this clock is going. Figuring that out, and I think that's the second thing is, share your idea over and over and over again. Because you get ideas, and you get confident. You realize where the gaps are. And I think it's also speaking to inside you know what you're unsure about. And this process of pitching forces you to deal with it versus just trying to procrastinate and not deal with the elephant in the room of whatever part of your business is that you're not sure about.

Ethan:

Pitch practice, that's amazing. It sounds like that was seriously one of the major benefits of the accelerator program. That's awesome.

Sabrina:

It's like repetitive practice. It's showing up on a weekly basis with the work that you have to do. It's a structure and it's around showing up and literally practicing it every week and every time you meet. Any business or any time you're doing things with your lifestyle in terms of trying to eat healthier or read a book or do different things, it's about a regular habit around that skill so that you can build confidence, that you can build like expertise in. And I think that's what this program did for me. And it was hard and I was constantly in it. But looking back, it's one of those programs where I'm so thankful I did it.

Annaka:

All right, so picking up in kind of another different direction here, where do you see ClearForMe in the future? If you could pick your ideal future, what does that look like?

Sabrina:

The biggest opportunity set that I see in front of me is the fact that in transparency and feeling empowered around our product choices is not going to go away. And the fact is that all products we consume are made up of ingredients. And so, while we are really focused on the beauty sector and segment or the industry, and it's a massive problem in the beauty [industry], but there's so many related industries in the wellness world, like food, cannabis, ingestibles. They're all related to beauty and cosmetics.

And so, for us, the opportunity set is being able to continue to grow our platform across the cosmetics industry and be able to then take that learnings and explore and enter other verticals that also are craving transparency. They're also craving personalization, and the ability to be able to feel empowered whenever we're shopping and trying to pick a product that's best for us or our families.

Ethan:

Cool, thank you. So, we're coming on to the end of 2021. So, what was one achievement that ClearForMe has had during 2021? And what's one thing for 2022 that you really hope to hit.

Sabrina:

So 2021 has been exciting. And actually just recently, a huge milestone for us is we just crossed our path to 300 customers. So, we have 300 different brands and retail partners that we are now working with at least and it's been continuing to grow. And that's a huge milestone because we're working with retailers, as I mentioned, Credo and Ulta Beauty, who is the largest beauty retailer in the US, but we also work with brands that have one skew, that five skews and 10 skews.

So, we're working with a breadth of different brands and retailers across the industry, all rooted in providing education or transparency to their end customers. And so, that's really exciting for us because of the different types of customers and brands that we work with. And it was a huge milestone. And it was a big name, it was BareMinerals, which was super exciting and such a huge brand and one of the largest skincare makeup brands in our space today. And to be able to partner with them as our 300th customer was just super incredible.

And you kind of geek out when you don't come from the beauty world, and you see all these products, and the idea that I can walk in and I see BareMinerals' ads or Hailey Bieber on a BareMinerals ad, and I'm like, "Wow, this is so cool." Our technology and database was somehow associated with BareMinerals. And we're doing some incredible things with brands like them but also other brands. So, that was a key milestone for us in 2021.

And as we continue to grow for us in 2022, I think there's some incredible things in our pipeline right now. We're speaking with some larger CPGs. And we have a path to piloting with some really large brands that I think the reason why that's exciting is because this means it's access — it's being able to reach more end customers. The ability that we can make an impact to any mom, who's shopping for a product at CVS or Target and be able to quickly answer those questions for her around what's safe for her kids.

As a mom, this is my journey. I so relate to that, where you're trying to buy things for all your family members, your husband, your kids. It's just being able to impact and really affect and made it easier for so many more people is why this journey is really exciting. So, for us, for 2022, it's going to be to really scale and scale across all of the brands in the industry. I mean, that's my goal. I want to reach every brand out there because every brand's customers need one transparency. So, that's where we're going.

Ethan:

Well, that's an amazing goal. Super happy to hear that you hit your major goals in 2021.

Annaka:

Yeah, huge milestone. It's great.

Sabrina:

Thank you.

Ethan:

Sounds like 2022 is going to be a really great year for ClearForMe. I want to ask you one more question before we start to wrap up. As you know, our audience consists of aspiring entrepreneurs, people who may be outside of the entrepreneurship world but look in and want to really take their shot. And I think what we're seeing here is that it's possible. It's absolutely possible. I love ClearForMe's story. It sounds like your adventure as a founder has been a great one. So, do you have any advice for aspiring entrepreneurs? What would you tell somebody who hasn't started yet?

Sabrina:

So it's kind of funny because the new year is around. And everyone does like the New Year's-

Annaka:

Yeah. The gyms will get busy.

Sabrina:

What are we going to do ... Exactly. And you're all thinking about that. And I try not to do that, you get caught up and what am I going to do for this year? What intentions do I want to set? So, there's this concept that I learned about last year, which really has shifted things for me. And it's not too dissimilar to something I talked about earlier. But it's this notion of the gap versus the gain. So, you're thinking about when we say we want to be healthy in the new year, I'm going to eat healthier. And then that day, you have some fruit and you eat clean, get a smoothie and you have some meat and protein or meat and vegetables. How do you know that you were actually eating healthy? And how do you know you're not eating healthy? Because essentially, you have this goal that's just healthy. It's just basically taking you to this goal as if you're trying to meet the horizon. You can never touch it because it's this vague goal that essentially doesn't mean anything. And so, you're always going to live in the gap because you're always chasing this thing that's saying, "I want to be healthy," or "I want to be more efficient with my time." It doesn't necessarily mean anything because we haven't defined it. And so, the key thing is to be able to get yourself to live in the gain. And the way you can live in the gain is by actually defining what it is that you want to do.

And so, I want to be healthy by drinking green juice three times a week. That actually then tells you on Saturday or if you start your week on Sunday, wherever you're at to say, "Hey, did I meet that goal? Did I have my juice three times this week? If yes, great. I am checking the box and I can now live in the gains and continue to move the needle forward."

And I think that's the same for entrepreneurs is we want to get our first paying customer. What does that mean? I want one customer to pay me a dollar? Do I want my customer to pay me \$1,000, \$500? What is that definition? And then who is that customer? I want a retail customer to pay me \$100 a month. That's so specific that you can then measure it to say, "Hey, this is happening." And you can then technically live in the game versus like, "Oh, I just want somebody to pay me."

And then you're like, "Okay, if I get a customer that pays me a dollar." Well, that's not what I meant. Then I can't give myself the props that I want for that work. You got a paying customer, but how do you define it? So, I think the notion that you could try to set that intention, the gap versus the gain, whether it's a daily intention about what are the things you want to accomplish that day and how do you measure it to something ... as more planning in the planning world, like we're doing in January around a year or a quarter.

I think that's something that I wish I did more of, I still want to do more of. I'm not perfect at this, but I think just an awareness around that has been really impactful for me.

Annaka:

Perfect, perfect. Love it. And you know we always wish you the best in everything that's coming up for you in 2022, and we've got a couple more, a couple more weeks left to go in this year.

Ethan:

What a pro, and I'm so glad that we got to talk to you today. Hey, and that's going to be a wrap for today's episode of the Startup Savants podcast. We want to thank you for stopping by and listening in. Hey! Do you want to chime in? Do you think we're doing a good job? Do you think we're doing terrible? Did we get anything right? Let us know in the comments. We read every single one and do our best to learn from you. For tools, guides, videos, startup stories, and so much more, head over to TRUiC.com. That's TRUiC.com 'T-R-U-I-C dot com.' Cya folks!

Annaka:

Bye Everyone!