

From Founder to CEO

Podcast

Host: Todd Uterstaedt

Guest: Chelsea Berler, Founder and CEO of Solamar Marketing Agency

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0:00: NARRATOR: Coming up on today's show:

0:02: CHELSEA: The hardest thing for me is I'm a doer so I'm really good at getting stuff done, I'm really good at customer service and really good at client-facing and project managing, and you know I love doing those things, but I'm also just really good at it and when I had to stop doing and start training and leading and educating group of people, it was really daunting for me.

0:27: NARRATOR: Welcome to the show that helps you make the successful journey from founder to CEO. Hear from dynamic, inspiring and successful founders as they share their insightful stories and practical tips that make becoming the CEO more fun, stress free and easier to build the company and life of your dreams. Now, please welcome your host, Todd Uterstaedt.

0:52: TODD: Ah, William, thank you for that kind introduction. So happy to be with you all today for this very first podcast and I'm very excited to have Chelsea Berler, founder and CEO of Solamar Marketing Agency, on the show today. Not only will we hear about Chelsea's successful journey, but she shares with us trusting too much and too soon, may lead to some unintended consequences. And she learned to take it slow and gain trust with others over time. Well before we get started with the interview you'll find some great resources to help you grow, build, scale and lead your company on our website fromfoundertoceo.com/grow.

1:43: TODD: In the studio today is Chelsea Berler. Chelsea founded Solamar Marketing Agency in 2006 and has been leading the way as the company's CEO ever since. In fact, she and her team of 21 have been about to turn this boutique marketing agency into a powerhouse in less than a decade. Chelsea, welcome to the show.

2:03: CHELSEA: Hi, thanks so much for having me.

2:05: TODD: It's my pleasure, my pleasure. So Chelsea, let's get things started. We all like a great story and founders love learning about other founders' stories. Walk us through if you will the starting story of you and Solamar.

2:17: CHELSEA: Yeah. It's one of my favorite stories. I really enjoy talking about it a lot because I think back to this moment in time and how I was not having any idea about what was about to happen (laughter). It's such a fun story. But basically, I was 21 years old, I had just dropped out of college because I got an offer to work for a really high profile company and thought, well you know I can't juggle both. I was paying for my own education, so I decided to go full time. They packaged up a really great deal for me and I was there for about three years in total, but within the first two years that I was there, I worked myself up really quickly up the corporate ladder, so by the time I turned 22 I was the Director of Business Development and Sales for the entire company. So I reported to basically the CEO and Vice President and in that moment in time, you know me being very young, the majority of the people I worked with were at least twice my age, I struggled a lot with having a voice within the company and I found that I would have a lot of ideas, I would be very creative and helping build their business, but when I would get in front of them to speak to them about it, it wasn't a good idea to them, or they didn't have the faith in me. I felt a little bit like they just entertained me, if that was the case, but when I realized that I was the only person within the history of that company to bring in \$5 million in revenue sales for them in my first six months there...

3:58: TODD: Wow. \$5million in six months?

4:00: CHELSEA: Yeah, it was crazy. I mean they had a lot of very large contracts, but still, it was something that hadn't ever been done before and I had did it. And so a huge part of my transitioning was, they had sent me to this trade show in San Diego and I was sitting in this booth and I'm thinking "Okay, is this how my life is going to be the rest of my life, because if it is, it sucks! And I don't know what else I can do within the company I'm in, I don't know how else to get the recognition and the props for doing what I'm doing. All that I feel like I'm looked at is this young girl that is just trying to make it". So I sat up all night long in this hotel room that they put me up in. It was about \$400 a night, of course they paid for it, I had never in my entire life experienced something like that. So we were in this hotel room because the trade show was there, so just second nature was for me staying there, but it was the most beautiful hotel I had ever seen and had ever been in. I had this like out of body experience where I just couldn't believe that even though, the work that I was doing I wasn't happy with, being in this situation I realized I wanted more for my life, I wanted to be able to create a lifestyle that I love, but also to create something where I felt respected and I felt that I could create something and be something more than what I am, or what I was. So that whole night I sat down and brainstormed a business plan. and basically I took all of the things that I knew how to do well, which was customer service, sales, marketing, business development and just kind of put it all together and thought "how can I help people do what I do"? SO I thought "well, everything is kind of marketing, so I'll just call it a marketing agency." And Solamar was actually the name of the hotel, Hotel Solamar in San Diego. So, I stayed up all night and put this all together and the next day I flew home and I realized, you know, I'm not going to be able to do anything with this yet, because I have no one else to lean on, I have no extra cash, I live paycheck to paycheck, and I have to take care of myself. And when I was talking to my family about wanting to do this, everyone thought I was crazy because I had health insurance and I had a 401(k), and I had a salary, and I was talking about wanting to start my own business and really everyone thought I was off my rocker.

6:28: TODD: (laughter)

6:28: CHELSEA: So I thought, well I'll do both of them at the same time. So for the last year I was at the company, I was 22, I started just kind of doing pro-bono work where I wanted to work with people to kind of showcase what I could do so I could have some type of portfolio. And so I did some work for some local businesses and couple online people for free. And then after they enjoyed me working with them, they hired me to be able to work within their environment, so I was a consultant, mostly. At this point I had no intention of growing the business of growing the business to where it is today. I had every intention of just quitting my job. And so in terms of thinking in that regard, all I thought about was, "how much do I need to make to be able to quit my job"?

7:17: TODD: Ah, Yes.

7:17: CHELSEA: And so I figured out what that number was so I could at least pay my bills and survive. And once I got there, about a year later, I quit and I did what I am doing now full time. At the time it was just me and I had one other sub-contractor and I was happy. I was good with it, everything was where it needed to be, money was being made, I was happy with it. But then, the need grew. A lot of people started talking about the work that we were doing and so before you know it, I've been working through all these referrals and I need to hire more people. Because at the end of the day I was either going to crash and burn because I only have so many hours in the day, or start hiring people. So that's really how it kicked off in terms of the first year, year and a half of making all that happen.

8:07: TODD: Well it's an amazing story and, you know, I actually read your book "The Curious One: From Food Stamps to CEO, One Woman's Journey Through Struggle, Tragedy, Success and Love", and you do a great job of chronicling your whole story to get to this point in time. I'm just curious, why did you write the book?

8:25: CHELSEA: Yeah, so I initially I had no interest in writing the book. I thought, you know, 1. A person I knew approached me and said "you know, you really need to write your story, it's really fantastic." and I thinking to myself "who would want to read this story and why is it so fantastic?" Like, to me, it was a very personal story full of a lot of struggle and tragedy and I felt like why would I even want to write about that? And then the more and

more I talked to her, she said to me "If you could help one person with your story, if you could reach one person and help change the trajectory of their life, would you do it?" And I said "Well, yeah, I guess I would do it!" Not really knowing or understanding what any of that meant, I hooked up with an editor and started writing and about six months later we had a book and it was actually a year ago, yester that it pre-launched and my life had never been the same since.

9:23: (laughter)

9:24: TODD: Well, it's a terrific book and I recommend every founder and CEO out there to get a copy because it's quite inspirational. You talk a lot about the challenges and struggles to get where you're at and I know a lot of founders and CEOs can agree that you just starting a company is pretty challenging in itself, but transitioning to the CEO, now that can be just as daunting, if not more so. So Chelsea, what's been the hardest part for you in this shift from founder to CEO?

9:50: CHELSEA: Oh my gosh. All of it.

9:52: (laughter)

9:54: CHELSEA: The hardest thing for me is I'm a doer so I'm really good at getting stuff done, I'm really good at customer service and really good at client-facing and project managing, and you know I love doing those things, but I'm also just really good at it and when I had to stop doing and start training and leading and educating group of people, it was really daunting for me because first, I didn't know a lot of people that helped, I didn't get a lot of help from other people that were leaders in the industry. I read a lot of books I followed a lot of people online and kind of just figured out, like there's some key, basic concepts in there: take care of your team like they're family, and make good business decisions and know your numbers. You know all of these things and before long when I was in that transition, I felt like "I don't know if I want to do this." There was a lot of legalities to it, there was a legal issue we had, there was, you know these things that I don't like and that make my stomach turn and are not enjoyable at all and unfortunately, for that time, as that transition was happening, that was my entire world, was doing stuff I didn't want to do, or that I had never done, or that was scary or I felt like I wasn't good enough for it. And so I had to really take a step back and start learning, just like everyone else how to really lead a team rather than, you know, be in the team. It was probably the most difficult thing for me.

11:27: TODD: Yeah, could you share a story that you think would describe the difference between founding leadership and being the CEO that other founders and CEOs would love to hear?

11:38: CHELSEA: Yeah, I think, you know, founding the company and running it in that way where I was also, you know 90% of I was doing the work for, when I worked with people, it was a collaborative team environment, where you could work to get things done and it was fun and it felt successful because I could successfully deliver things or I could, I could put my hand on something and make it successful within another client's business. And I really enjoyed how that made me feel and I also enjoyed working with the people I was working with. When I transitioned to being more of a CEO, more of a leader, and less of doing all that other stuff, I felt a little bit like I was missing a part of me, that I had always loved and felt I was always going to do and feeling like I have to be this CEO, like I don't know where else to go from here other than to grow the business. And the business needs a leader, and unless I'm hiring someone for that, and there was no financial option there, you know, I am that person. And then, being in a leadership perspective, having to be quote-unquote "the boss" if you will, was hard because I was really good at relationships and also just being friendly with people. I had to change the way I had relationships within the team and within the clients that we were working with and that was really heart wrenching for me because I am definitely more centered upon taking care of people. And when you become that leader, the CEO, you have to really combine that love and taking care of people with a balance of running the business and thinking like a business owner and that was probably, you know, the biggest transition for me.

13:31: TODD: Yeah, that can be hard. Are you suggesting that you kind of have to draw a little bit more of a firmer line between friend and the leader, in order to get the work done?

13:43: CHELSEA: Totally, totally. Because even though I think I can be friends with everyone, there comes a point where you also have to be the person that delivers bad news or that has to hire and fire. You know, like, there are so many things that as a start-up and as, turning into a CEO that you have to do, that you can't also really be good friends with somebody for, without them not taking you seriously. So, I had to not be me so much if that makes sense.

14:13: TODD: Well, since I do know you a little bit and you are very, very friendly, I can understand the challenges of someone who really wants to be able to be engaged with people and have fun and you certainly have a really fun culture at Solamar and it's a really good culture. So what do you do for yourself when you need to think and get clear about things? When you need that space, what do you do?

14:36: CHELSEA: Well there's a couple things that I do for sure. I consult with my husband a lot, like when I'm feeling stuffy and confused, not clear. Just having a conversation just completely outside of the regular conversations that are happening within the business and just getting an outsider opinion or support has been really helpful for me. Also, being able to literally unplug. I haven't been able to go longer than a day, but to at least unplug for a day or an afternoon and read, I really enjoy entrepreneurial magazines and publications and so I find myself feeling more driven kind of when I delve into those things. And then I feel more clear then focusing on the company as a whole. I think those are the things that I probably do pretty regularly, and then every morning when I wake up before I start my day, before I check email, I do a little bit of journaling in a unique way where I talk a little bit about my goals for the day, for the month, for the year and I consistently just write them down because I need to be reminded of why I'm doing what I'm doing and what I'm doing and all of those important things so I do that a lot too.

15:52: TODD: That's great, I know journaling works a lot of a lot of people and I wonder since you do journal, what would Chelsea the CEO tell Chelsea the Founder about growing a team?

16:02: CHELSEA: Don't give up. Don't give up, keep going, that it's going to be really hard, but after you punch through that door of difficulty it gets some much better and so much sweeter on the other side and I think that's a lot of times where people fail is they don't keep going and they don't push through the most difficulty of thing and they end up just dissolving their business, so I think that would be the most important thing.

16:35: TODD: Now you know a lot of founders and CEOs tell me that the team development piece is very challenging for them and ends up being one of the biggest emphases to either growth or the company going under. And so I'm just curious, I know that you've had a lot of joyous moments, but can you give us an example of a frustrating team building moment and what you learned from it that would be really helpful to other founder and CEOs?

17:04: CHELSEA: Yeah, you know I've had a lot of challenges. Just a preface the conversation is, the team that I have now is probably my favorite ever and it's taken me years to get there, so the struggles to get there have definitely been surrounding around finding the right people and if they aren't the right people, you're having to hire them just as quickly. And that's really hard for me, that's a big challenge for me, but in order to be able to reach that team's success, it has everything to do with how you hire, how you fire, how you handle the team in terms of how they work together as a community in a team environment and all that had to do with you, like you have to create that, you have to make all that happen. So to be able to do that, also in a virtual way, because a lot of our team members are virtual...

18:05: TODD: Ah, yes.

18:05: CHELSEA: ...is just a tough thing. Thankfully today, I think most everyone has been around for anywhere between two and four years, whereas the first couple years of my business, I had to let go of a lot of people and hire a lot more people and spent so much of my time having to focus on that.

18:26: TODD: How much time would you say you have to spend on that?

18:27: CHELSEA: Oh my gosh...

18:28: TODD: Percentage of your time, you know, as CEO?

18:30: CHELSEA: I would say, 75% of my time.

18:33: TODD: Wow, that's a lot.

18:34: CHELSEA: Because, the thing is, you're only as good as your team is, right? So if the team's not good, your work sucks. Your clients are unhappy and it consumes you, it consumes every morsel of yourself and for me, it hurts. Like when somebody's unhappy, or we didn't deliver, it hurts me. I feel really bad about it and to be able to now have a stronger team that can work more closely together, it's so much more relaxing to know that we've found our groove, but it took a long while.

19:09: TODD: Yeah, that's terrific. Many founder and CEOs I talk to tell me about how really important it is to work on that team and it does take a lot of time just as you mentioned. And Chelsea, sometimes our ability to work on a team and build our team also relates to our blind spots, and when we come back from that break, you're going to share with us one of your biggest business building blind spots.

19:32: (Music)

19:40: TODD: Hey, it's Todd. If there's one thing I hear from founding CEOs all the time it's that you are extremely busy, so my team pulled together 63 productivity hacks from 50 top founding CEOs like you and designed a beautiful .pdf for you to get some quick wins, getting more productivity from your day and from your team. Team management, data management, project management, marketing management tips and more are in this great guide. So go grab it now on our home page at fromfoundertoceo.com and just get more done.

20:12: (Music)

20:19: TODD: So Chelsea, a lot of successful founders and CEOs have told me that, you know, self-awareness is key to being an effective CEO. And since we all have blind spots, what's your biggest blind spot toward business building that you can share with our audience of founder and CEOs, and what do you do to make sure it doesn't negatively impact the business?

20:39: CHELSEA: Yeah, so I trusted too much. I trusted that people's word was their word and I trusted people that if I took care of them, that they would also take care of the company and the things and so I think I probably had my guard down a little too much with meeting new people and people coming into the team environment and having so much faith in them, that I realize now as a CEO people have to earn that. And fortunately, I feel in my opinion that's the case, where I can't just go from zero to sixty with a person anymore like I used to, like I want to, I have to take it slower and gain trust within the people that you surround yourself with. That is probably where my blind spot was for a long time.

21:31: TODD: That's really insightful. I know you're not the only founder and CEO out there because I think we all want to start out with trusting the people who get excited about our business and who kind of help us found it, so thank you for sharing that. So, we're going to switch gears, Chelsea into our Rapid Resource Roundup where we focus on

a couple key pieces of information that we know help a lot of founder and CEOs. The first one is - what do you use to increase your productivity? What tips, tricks, techniques, software, what do you use to increase your productivity?

22:01: CHELSEA: Okay, so right now I have a super-duper favorite. It's called HipChat and it combines our entire team on a messaging system and in the past we've tried a couple different because, well you know a lot of us are virtual, and they've been okay and there's like Skype and things like that, but with HipChat you can make your own rooms, so we have rooms for the Account Managers, rooms for the IT people, rooms for myself and the VP, rooms for customer service, and then we have one full group room and you can also connect on an individual level. The beauty in this and something that's so important that I've learned is it also documents that transcripts so its saved within the company should we need them for any reason. That's all there as well and so that's really how us as a team communicates and so far this has been the best application I've found in terms of being able to see everyone all the time and to communicate with them. There's video incorporated into there and I have been having a blast with it so that's definitely my favorite one so far.

23:07: TODD: Oh, that's terrific; I'll make sure that's in the show notes for everyone else to see as well. What about this, what's been the most helpful book for you in the shift from founder to CEO?

23:16: CHELSEA: Yeah, one of my favorites is "Mistakes Were Made, But Not by Me".

23:21: TODD: Ah, Yes.

23:22: CHELSEA: I can't think of who it's written by, it's probably my favorite book because of the topics that they discuss, but also, as you grow as a person and as you grow as a CEO or grow into a CEO, we're all learning and we're all evolving an human beings and I think that we learn along the way just like anyone else and to be able to have some advice and some insights and some different ways of thinking that came from that book has helped me to probably grow up a little bit faster in terms of how I run a business and how I communicate and how I work with people.

24:03: TODD: Yeah, that's a great book; I'll make sure that's in the show notes as well. What about a favorite founder that you've looked to for advice or even just inspiration?

24:11: CHELSEA: Yeah, you know I've had a lot favorites in my life and as I have just transitioned year to year in growing the business, but I would say someone that's really consistent for me is definitely Andrea Lee and it has a lot to do with, when I was first starting out, I would say at least six years ago, she had interests in coaching me without me having to come up with a gazillion dollars to afford her and it was one of the first moments in my life that I realized that someone wants to help me and someone really genuinely cares about me. And she has really been an advocate for Solamar and for me growing as a business. I haven't worked with her as closely in the last couple of years, but I always look to her in terms of being a leader in this industry and a mentor and a founder and CEO of her own businesses as well.

25: 14: TODD: Ah, that's great. And so, I'm curious as we head toward the end of the interview, has there been a biggest surprise to you about the transition from founder to CEO? Something that surprised you?

25:26: CHELSEA: Yeah, for sure, you know I was, I remember this like it was yesterday. I wrote this in my book too, I was 27 and we were doing my taxes for the previous year and I had made well over a half a million dollars and I had now idea.

25:44: TODD: That's a nice surprise to have!

25:46: CHELSEA: And it was that moment in my life where I was a founder turning CEO, not realizing the success because I was so knee deep into it and I was so busy and so focused on success that I had no idea that by the number we were being successful until I was actually doing my taxes and it blew my mind because I never intended nor did I ever think that I could have a business that actually is profitable, that does well. And it was a huge moment in my life because then I realized really anything is possible; you just have to believe in yourself and have the drive to make it happen.

26:26: TODD: Wow, that's great. So, what's possible for Solamar? What's in the future for you and Solamar and where do you want to take the company as CEO?

26:35: CHELSEA: Yeah, you know it's interesting because most people's general reaction is "oh we want to grow bigger and, you know, have all this success and be a large company" and really, I just want to be a better company, so, especially, you know this year my motto is really monetizing what we have and what we've invested in. I really, really want to strengthen our foundation, strengthen our team more and to be able to become a better company, not necessarily a bigger one. I think that's important to me right now - taking care of the clients we have, not just adding more clients to the list. And it's near and dear to my heart so that's where my focus is right now for sure.

27:16: TODD: That's wonderful. Well I hope the founders and CEOs out there will really take an opportunity to read your book "The Curious One: From Food Stamps to CEO" because I think it really talks about the struggles of founding a company and your very, very generous thoughts today about becoming the CEO after being the founder are just as powerful. So, Chelsea, if people want to learn more about Solamar and about you, how can they find you?

27:38: CHELSEA: Yeah, so for Solamar its solamaragency.com, that's s-o-l-a-m-a-r-agency.com. and then my business page is mostlychelsea.com, so that's where we're at!

27:50: TODD: That sounds great! And Chelsea, thanks so much for taking the time today, I really appreciate it and I'm sure we'll be talking to you soon

27:56: CHELSEA: Awesome, thank you!

27:59: TODD: Thank you for listening, I hope you enjoyed the show and I would love to hear your thoughts and your feedback. If you have the time, and you're so inclined, I'd be grateful for your rating and review on iTunes. Oh yeah, and don't forget to download my free gift to you "The 5 Proven Steps That Turn Founders into CEOs Fast." Just head over to fromfoundertoceo.com to download them now. Until next time, may success be with you.

28:37: end