

Episode 3: The Supply Chain Challenges of Becoming an Overnight Sensation with Brian Halasinski and Kirk Hyust

Richard Howells: Welcome to the Future of Supply Chain podcast from SAP. My name's Richard Howells and I'm the Vice President for Thought Leadership for SAP's ERP, Finance, and Supply Chain Solutions. And I'm joined by my co-host Nicole. Nicole, over to you.

Nicole Smythe: Hi everyone. I'm Nicole Smythe and I'm a marketer, podcaster, and blogger in the supply chain area here at SAP. So today we're joined by our special guests, a pair whom listeners may be familiar with if they watch primetime television, entrepreneurs and inventors, Brian Halasinski and Kirk Hyust.

So welcome Brian and Kirk. It's really great to have you both on and thank you so much for joining us today. So, if you could just take a moment to introduce yourselves, dive a bit into your professional experiences, and, of course, your company.

Brian Halasinski: Okay. Yeah, I'll go first. I'm Brian Halasinski and, for about the past 20 years, I've worked as a sales rep in the pharmaceutical industry and, I, you know, met Kirk about seven years ago, we moved into a new house and Kirk was a renovation specialist.

You know, we needed some work done when we were moving in, and I'd never met Kirk before, so somebody had recommended that he do some work on the house. And so Kirk came over and was working on the house. And at that time, he had invented a wrench and I had never thought about inventing really, or nothing of the sort. And Kirk was showing me this wrench that he had and how that process worked, and it got me interested. And, as he was working at my house for an eight-month period of time, doing various renovation jobs, we became friends and then we decided to go into business together. And that would be inventing; so we were going to be inventing partners. And from there, we've invented several different products, Turbo Trusser being our latest product that we've taken all the way to Shark Tank and beyond at this point. So, that's a little bit about me and where Kirk and I met. I'll let Kirk tell a little bit about his background because it's different than mine; I've got the sales background, I've worked for Fortune 500 companies in manufacturing.

A little bit of a different background - I went to Kent State University, I got my undergraduate there and I got my MBA from Malone University. So, a lot of the computer stuff, that's kind of my realm. And then Kirk brings a different perspective to our business.

Kirk Hyust: Hi, my name is Kirk Hyust, from Canton, Ohio, born and raised here. Thanks for having us on. As Brian stated, I'm currently a contractor. I've been a contractor for the past 20, 25 years. But before that, I was trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, as a chef. I was a chef for about five years and I got burned out quickly. So, I moved into the building trades and I started out as a painter. Now, I pretty much renovate entire houses in small commercial spaces, and like Brian said, that's how I met him. And I write a lot of patents - I think I have about 10 or 12 patents right now, but I write most of my own PPAs, the Provisional Patent Applications.

You know, I build a lot of prototypes, so when we invent together, we come up with ideas and then, we come up with the best strategy. And I have a workshop, so we start there with all of our inventions.

So, like he said, he is more the brains of the computer and how to navigate, and I can build stuff and put it together, and then we collaborate at the end to figure out our strategy.

Richard Howells: That's really interesting how you've both come together from completely different backgrounds and then went on Shark Tank, as you mentioned it, late last year, late in 2022. Episode Two of Season 14, to be exact, if anyone would like to watch it. You very uniquely presented this unique kitchen gadget, the Turbo Trusser. So, for people that didn't see the show, what exactly is the Turbo Trusser?

Brian Halasinski: So, the Turbo Trusser is a rapid trussing device for using when you cook whole chickens or turkeys. And what it does, it keeps the legs and the wings close to the body so that it cooks more evenly, so you don't dry out the breast before the legs are cooked. In this whole process, that whole technique is called trussing.

But traditionally, for the last hundred years, it's been done with butcher's twine. You take the butcher's twine, you watch a video, you try to figure it out, your hands get all messy and slippery, you watch a video again because you didn't get it figured out in time. And then, if you're lucky, you got it figured out and you go from there.

With the Turbo Trusser, you can do all that in 20 seconds and you're done, throw it in the dishwasher and use it again and again.

Richard Howells: Wow.

Nicole Smythe: That's awesome. Well, soon enough, I know I'm going to be taking over the cooking for Christmas and Thanksgiving, so I may be buying myself one, or a few, of those because I am certainly not a wiz in the kitchen. But as seen, you know, from the episode, you two were successful in getting an offer and also accepting an offer from a Shark, Mr. Wonderful or Kevin O'Leary.

So how was your experience being on the show? I know you guys, like Richard said, came in with a bit of a unique take. But how did it feel to negotiate the stakes of your company on the spot in such a high-stakes situation?

Brian Halasinski: Well, like you said, we did come in in a unique way. For your listeners out there, if you see the episode, I'm the chicken and Kirk is the turkey; and we did come out in full costume and whether it helped or not, we got a deal.

But being out there, it was extremely stressful. It's not quite what you see on TV because you go in there, and you're in the tank for, you know, could be 30 minutes. It could be 30 minutes up to two hours, they've told us for bigger, larger companies. So, you're in there and literally when you get out, it's like a whirlwind, you can barely remember what happened. There's just a lot of questions, a lot of talking over each other. If you watched the first episode of the season, it was live. And it kind of would be like what you would expect when you really see what's going on without the audience because there's no audience when you're filming for the Shark Tank.

But Kirk and I, we negotiated, we didn't get any wiggle room. We went back and forth with Kevin O'Leary several times; Kirk jumped in and made offers. He was not budging. Ultimately, you know, we took the deal and we're grateful that we did.

Kirk Hyust: Absolutely. Yeah. It was very intense. It was probably the most intense thing I've ever done in my entire life. You know, Brian, he is a born salesman and he is really good at getting in front of people. And even he was shaken up a little bit, but I was really shook up. I even froze for a second, he saved me, he got me to get my lines going again, just because it was crazy. Let's just put it that way.

Brian Halasinski: Lights, camera, action. I'm up there, I was sweating so it was 45 minutes of intense pressure.

Richard Howells: I can only imagine the pressure that you were facing. You mentioned on the show, that you'd been in business for several months with the Turkey Trusser before the show, and you were quite successful prior to the show.

So, before we talk about the show itself and what happened after, can you explain the process you went through? And I think, Kirk, you touched on this a little bit, of designing the Turbo Trusser itself. And how you selected a contract manufacturer, and your original marketing approach, and the results that you got before.

Kirk Hyust: Yeah, I don't know a ton about manufacturing, but I know enough to be dangerous. And right when we first started out, we realized that it was either going to be made out of wire or stamped out of metal. And we were leaning towards stamping. So that's kind of our direction. So our first prototype was made out of cardboard because it was thin. Our second was out of wood because we wanted to use it. But we both decided, when we first started this, is if we can't make it in Ohio or somewhere close to our house in the United States, we're not going to do it. Reasonably, you know.

So we came up with our price point. We figured that it could probably sell. So what we did is we went through a bunch of variations, I don't know, I think we had about five or six different ones before we came to our final product.

Brian Halasinski: Yeah. We even eventually had it laser cut.

Kirk Hyust: Mm-hmm.

Brian Halasinski: Laser cut was the last step before we got to the stamper.

Kirk Hyust: Exactly. Exactly. I made the wires by hand. And then we had a laser cut and we sent it out and we let a bunch of people test it. And at this time, we were even trying to license it, before we decided to manufacture ourselves. But that was right in the middle of a pandemic. So we said, hey, listen, we can find a contract manufacturer here in Cleveland or in Ohio. So we found the wire manufacturer, and the stamper, and the packager, all within an hour of our house. So, it really helped us really streamline it and get it out to the market fast.

Richard Howells: And then what was your go-to-market approach originally?

Brian Halasinski: This is a good one. Basically, it's Gorilla Marketing 101.

You know, if you go on Facebook, and because we've launched or designed barbecue products for a while or cooking products, I've joined hundreds of Facebook groups that are 'Barbecue Masters' or 'Best Cooks in Texas'. There's hundreds of individual groups that you can join that are specialized for barbecue.

What we did was, we cooked the chickens and the turkeys, and we'd go, and post a picture in these groups and say, 'Hey, look at this awesome chicken'. And people would see this and go, 'what is that thing?' And we'd go, 'Oh, that's the Turbo Trusser - here's our website.'

And just from simply doing that, we did like \$50,000 worth of sales in November and December of 2021, the first two months that we launched. We did a little bit of Facebook marketing in there once we got it going, but the majority of our sales came directly from posting in groups that were related to this product and getting people interested and asking questions, and then, we had a website built where they could go and purchase from.

And for the first two months, they just bought from our website, which is turbotrusser.com, that's just a Shopify website. So, you know, we did that with minimal resources, set up a Shopify store, and we were off to the races.

Nicole Smythe: It's amazing and I think it's so great that it's homegrown too. You know, it's a very organic type of marketing style, but it worked. And, I myself, I am a part of, I don't even know how many at this point, but at least maybe five or six different book club Facebook groups. I've bought bookmarks, bookholders, bookshelves. I've bought the whole works from it. So it's amazing just to see what social media and Facebook can do from a marketing perspective. So it's great that you guys were able to utilize that.

But as you mentioned, since your episode airing back in September of 2022, what impacts has this had on your company, especially from a supply chain perspective? Because I can only imagine with the timing of the episode and with this past holiday season following shortly after, and how that reached such a larger audience, how did that affect your demand? Especially during what is known as the busiest buying season of the year.

Brian Halasinski: Yeah. And what is especially challenging too, with, you know, Shark Tank, and it's just the way that the process works is, you only get three weeks advanced notice of when your episode is going to air. So you don't have time to prepare and stockpile inventory unless you got suppliers that are within one hour of your doorstep, which we do, and it saved us. We had some issues where we went out of stock on Amazon, but we had stock on our website, so we never went out of stock. We had low inventory, but we always were able to go up and pick up a 500 here if we needed it, or a 2000 tomorrow. We were just constantly making trips, 50, 45 minutes, back and forth to our supplier. And we would have finished goods, back in our warehouse, ready to ship either to Amazon or to Shopify.

Kirk Hyust: Yeah, and then we ran out of packaging. This is the really good part of having the manufacturer near your house is, they gave us a lead time of like November 15th for new packaging, and we needed it now because we were almost out. So, I called the salesman and I'm like, 'can you please, do something for us? I mean, can you speed this along?' I think we had it in, what, five days?

Brian Halasinski: Mm-hmm.

Kirk Hyust: We had it delivered to our stamper, who actually packaged them for us, in five days. They gave us a lead time of over a month and then we had them in five days. So, we had it like that. So it saved us that's a really good benefit of being manufactured in the United States.

Richard Howells: Just from a value of scale, how much did your sales go up after that first TV show?

Brian Halasinski: Seven X, from before the show to after.

Richard Howells: And then I believe, the show was re-aired a few months later.

Brian Halasinski: Yeah. So the show re-aired on December 30th, Primetime at eight o'clock on ABC. We didn't even know, they didn't tell us. Somebody had texted me and said, your show's re-airing. And I went home, and watched it again, and it was amazing to just watch the sales ticker just go bananas.

It's really unbelievable the power that Shark Tank.

Richard Howells: With that in mind, you are a relatively, well, a very small company. It's the two of you and then I'm assuming, contract manufacturers.

Brian Halasinski: Yep. And don't forget Kevin. Yeah, we've done all of the work. Yeah, he's just there to collect some cash and help us along the way with the big stuff.

Richard Howells: He can certainly help with the demand generation, I'm sure. But what's your biggest challenge of getting your products to customers?

Brian Halasinski & Kirk Hyust: Probably marketing. Marketing.

Brian Halasinski: Neither one of us are marketers. The marketing arena changes on a daily basis. The algorithms change. You know, Apple made changes so you can ask apps not to track you, so now it's even more difficult to advertise on platforms like Facebook, and Pinterest, and Instagram.

So, it's trying to get the product in front of the right customers. I think, you know, we can make them and we can make as many as we can sell. We just need to get it in front of the customers, whether that's on television, we see that a rerun gives us huge spikes in sales. So how do we find ways to either get on live TV now? We've done local shows like Fox, New Day Cleveland, and we see a nice sales bump from those shows. You know, Good Morning America, if they're listening, we're available. You know, any of these large shows, we'd love to be able to come and talk turkey, talk chicken, maybe we can bring Kevin O'Leary with us too. That would be, ideally, the more we can get the word out, the better.

Richard Howells: And what do you see for the future of the Turkey Trusser? I mean, are infomercials in your future?

Brian Halasinski: Definitely. We're looking at QVC, Kevin's got a relationship with QVC already, so he does pitches on there for them now for products that he is affiliated with. So, you know, we've talked to him about that. That's something that we're going to pursue in 2023 this year.

And then we're looking to make a move into the retail market. We've got a really awesome display that's been designed, that is also another local company, that's going give us three different options on displays in the retail market. And, you know, we want to bring in the Turkey Turbo Trusser right next to the turkeys in October, November. Let them ride out there for the fourth quarter, when people are buying turkeys, and then we can ride off into the sunset, and sell online and through different channels, and we'll come back to those grocery stores and retailers when they need us again in the fall.

Richard Howells: And if you plan to sell in the UK, Christmas is the huge turkey season. Just so that you know. Everybody buys a turkey at Christmas in the UK.

Brian Halasinski: That would be perfect. Yeah. Yeah. That's another thing, navigating that international sales market is really challenging. We haven't really even attempted it much. We have a distributor in Canada that sells to some stores up there. Even just activating Amazon Canada is not as easy as you would think. You got to have special business licenses to operate in Canada and so forth. So, Marketing is a challenge. International sales is a challenge.

Copyright infringement, or counterfeit products, has been a major challenge. We had I think 178, so far, different counterfeit companies trying to sell our products.

Kirk Hyust: Yeah. We have 300 and, what is it? 318 listings over 178 different counterfeiters.

Brian Halasinski: You know, for a while there, they took a significant chunk of sales from our Amazon business in the month of October, which we were really humming along, and then, they came on and they were able to latch onto our listing, sell for a lower price, and never even deliver before they get rid of them.

You know, that's the nature of the beast. We've got a company now, here in the US that works with companies like us, and they go after infringers in the international market. So, we'll see them in court, maybe. (laughs) Yeah, not us personally. They'll do all that.

Richard Howells: Just one other question, before I pass it back to Nicole, does Kevin O'Leary bring any infrastructure that can help you in the marketing and the sales and distribution side of things?

Brian Halasinski: So, basically, Kevin's team, they recommended and Kevin's affiliated with the marketing company. And since we've come on board, we've onboarded with that company and they have an a la carte type of service so we don't use all their services, as Kevin does. He has his own websites and this company manages his marketing. They manage our marketing.

So those type of services is not necessarily coming from Kevin O'Leary, but it's an affiliation of his, and then we're going to be leaning on him, specifically to get us appointments in with buyers at larger chains; that can be challenging for small companies to be able to just get an appointment. But Kevin has relationships in stores like Albertson's and beyond, so we are going to lean on him to get us in some appointments so we can present our product in the grocery market and Home Depot, Lowe's type of things.

Nicole Smythe: Well, you have two new customers here and all of our extended family as well, so, and we got some big families on our side. So, you certainly have a few new ones here.

Brian Halasinski & Kirk Hyust: Awesome. We appreciate it so much.

Nicole Smythe: Of course, like I said, I'm not a wiz in the kitchen, so I'm putting a lot of faith in the Turbo Trusser and I know it'll pull through.

Brian Halasinski & Kirk Hyust: It will. It'll be the best bird you ever cooked in your life.

Nicole Smythe: I'll impress a lot of people, so be sure of that

Brian Halasinski: Yeah, we, matter a fact, I just got a new five-star review on our website. Somebody said that it was a five-star, very satisfied with how the Turbo Trusser cooks, a very juicy and tasty chicken, great cooking tool. I just got that about an hour ago. That's what's the best is when you hear

people, and they cook something, and it comes out, and they say it's the best they've ever had it. It really does work. You know, it's awesome to see other people have success with it too, and, it makes it all worthwhile in the end.

Nicole Smythe: That's awesome. Well, I know you spoke earlier in the show about how you two became friends and form that partnership with your main goal and desire to invent or develop something new. So, my question to you is, what type of innovation or developments do you see as trailblazers now in the food and consumer industry?

Kirk Hyust: Hmm. That's a very good question. Well, it's a really hard space to develop for.

Brian Halasinski: Like kitchen and cooking gadgets has got to be one of the hardest markets to innovate for. A lot of those companies have huge internal teams, but some of them do work with what we call ourselves 'Open Innovation Developers' and there are companies out there where you can submit your ideas to.

But as far as, you know, us personally, what we're working on, we're so focused on the Turbo Trusser right now that, until we get this fully running and where we believe it should be, we've kind of turned off some of that innovation creation in your head. You know, it's kind of weird, you can turn it off and on, but right now, being so focused on that, it's like if it's not affiliated with that product, we're not messing with it until this thing is complete.

Richard Howells: And I bet it is taking all of your time, as well.

Brian Halasinski & Kirk Hyust: Yeah. Yes, sure is.

Nicole Smythe: Eyes on the prize.

Kirk Hyust: Eyes on the prize. Exactly right.

Brian Halasinski: But you know, as far as what you said, I think things that people can use once, twice. People love that kind of stuff. They can just get rid of it. People are used to buying things for a couple dollars, but now with inflation, you know, I think people maybe aren't spending stuff on those frivolous things. Something like the Turbo Trusser, you buy it, it lasts a lifetime. You put it with your roaster, your Turkey baster, and it's going to be there every year. And our price point at \$15.99, Made in the USA, it's really an affordable price for anybody to be able to have a perfect chicken or turkey.

Richard Howells: That's a great point actually, that fact that it's reusable and not a throwaway because sustainability is a huge issue with most people and most businesses these days. Something that, as you say, will be used over and over again is invaluable.

We're coming to the end of the podcast and there's a question that we ask everybody on the podcast because we're doing the Future of Supply Chain. So, as a small company, if you had to summarize in a few sentences, what do you see the Future of Supply Chain for businesses like you?

Brian Halasinski: Really, for us, the future is to keep the supply chain close. Very tight. For us, it's made all the difference when we can take short trips, minimize our inventory. Because you know, as a small company, cash flow is everything. And for us to put a lot of money out in inventory, not knowing for sure when it's going to sell, the seasonality of things, when you're testing out marketing, we're just trying to test this whole thing out. And you don't want to spend too much on anything. And having

suppliers that are close allows you to really keep your inventory costs low, it keeps your lead times very low. We don't have to worry about shipping containers getting stuck over in somewhere. The fluctuating cost of a container a couple years ago, well, it went all the way up, I think to \$30,000. I know it's come significantly down, but, you know, we just have to worry about the cost of gas and worry about maybe if there's some snow on the ground.

But I would say for small companies, look to the US. There's plenty of manufacturers here in the US that would love to work with small companies. You have got to find them, but they're there. And once you find them, and you form that relationship with them, it makes all the difference. Our three suppliers, soon to be four, when we come on board with our new display company, they've all been just amazing with us.

Richard Howells: Having that flexibility and to be able to respond to surges in demand is invaluable. And having your suppliers and contract manufacturers local to you must be a godsend.

Kirk Hyust: Yes. I mean, we couldn't have done it without them being this close because we were operating on such a shoestring. You know, our cash flow, like Brian said, when we went on the Shark Tank, we had \$600 in our bank account.

Brian Halasinski: And about 4,000 in receivables.

Kirk Hyust: Yeah.

Brian Halasinski: And some inventory. We had like 8,000 units and like 4,000 bucks. So we had to figure out a way to sell these things, and going on Shark Tank was the fuel that we needed for our product. It just, it added fuel to the fire is what I meant to say.

Richard Howells: I'd like to thank you both for a great conversation. It was really interesting. It's something different for our listeners because it's somebody that's actually gone and done it and are right in the middle of a new product launch and it's great to see that you are getting great success.

So thanks for a great conversation.

Brian Halasinski: Thank you guys so much, both for having us on. I mean, the opportunity to come and talk to you guys, it gets the word out about our product, but ultimately it gets the word out to hopefully other entrepreneurs that can see two guys in a garage. This is where it all started working in my garage. So, we figured we're going to do the podcast from my garage. We're still work out of my garage to this day, and I mean, if we can do it, anybody can do it.

Richard Howells: Well, thank you Brian and Kirk for a great conversation.

Kirk Hyust: Thank you.

Richard Howells: Thanks to everyone for listening today. Please mark us as a favorite and you can get regular updates and information about future episodes. There'll be information about where to find out more about the Turbo Trusser attached to this podcast. But until next time, from Nicole and I, thank you for discussing the Future of Supply Chain.