

# SRLV x Kitt Medical & Do Re Mi Books

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Entrepreneurship, publishing industry, anaphylaxis kits, business strategies, personal stories, leadership, validation, funding, branding, market challenges, product development, team growth, customer success, innovation, startup journey.

## SPEAKERS

Sam Voulters, Zak Marks, Adam Stanley

### **Zak Marks** 00:00

At this point, we have 19 lives saved with the kits as of last week, which was a gel pen exploding in a child's mouth, causing their tongue and throat to swell up because of dye and like a pyro like, yep, Whoa, yeah.

### **Sam Voulters** 00:12

There are books that we're publishing where we expect there would be interest from production companies to adapt into TV, film, toys, whatever else it is. It's a great ambition. It won't be all of our books, but if it's one or two over the next few years, that will be amazing for us.

### **Adam Stanley** 00:28

What's one decision you're most proud of?

### **Sam Voulters** 00:30

One decision you make differently. The difficult decision is hiring the right person and then giving them the space to kind of do their best work.

### **Adam Stanley** 00:41

Welcome to SRLV's Not Just a Number. Each episode's candid conversation focuses on personal stories, business strategies, leadership and top tips from scaling up companies, entrepreneurs, creatives and industry pioneers today. We are delighted to be joined by Sam Voulters of Do Re Mi Books, a London based children's publication company, and Zak Marks of Kitt Medical, support in anaphylaxis kits. We're here today just to talk about entrepreneurship and their business journeys from inception through to where they are now.

### **Adam Stanley** 01:18

Straight off the bat, I am going to say that obviously this is kind of one half of like the founding team. And so a little nod to Anna, your wife, who is an artist and illustrator as well, as I'm sure, amongst many other things as well. And obviously, James for yourself, going, who is what? Commercial operations and strategist

**Zak Marks 01:39**

older, smarter, wiser.

**Adam Stanley 01:41**

Unfortunately, you guys got the short straw, so you're hearing me today, but a nice little nod to those two. So it's always good to recognize your piss. So let's start with you, Sam, obviously, prior to directing me, let's think about your journey previous to that, and your business experiences. You spent some time at Penguin previously, yeah, and won awards as well.

**Sam Voulters 02:04**

Yeah. So I joined Penguin. I mean, I started my career as a fashion editor and working in magazines, so I've always been in some form of publishing, but I moved to Penguin as brand manager of Penguin Classics. 15 years ago, probably, and that was great because very, very, very, very established publisher, the biggest trade English language trade publisher in the world. And learn an awful lot about, when you've got real budgets to work with, how you get people's attention for the books that you're publishing, and also as the biggest player in the market, you know there's a constant drive to to to gain market share, and also, as one of the biggest players, you've got to run quite fast to stand still, because there's competitors biting at your heels all the time. So it was a real hub of innovation, perhaps surprisingly, to some people who think of book publishing as quite a staid and static industry, it's, it's not from my experience, and it was a, it was a really good training ground to kind of understand what can be done in the book space. I was then brand director of Penguin Classics, and I was, I stayed at within that business, I think, for 12 years, and then moved to another publisher called Gemini, where I was brand marketing and comms director, was only there for a short time before before leaving and starting Do Ro Me with my wife, Anna, and that journey started about a year ago, and we're still about six months away from publishing our first books.

**Adam Stanley 03:34**

What valuable experiences or knowledge or expertise did you gain during that time? As you said at Penguin Classics and Gemini, that kind of set you up prior to jumping.

**Sam Voulters 03:45**

I suppose I mean a lot, because it was most of my career to that point. So everything I know I owe to those experiences. But I suppose if I were to distinguish between the two of them, at Penguin, I learned about striving towards excellence and being the best. Because I think if you want to carve out space for yourself as a new business, you have to have that in mind, and to really try to cut through, I think you need, you need to aim high. Gemini was really useful because it was a business just starting out, and I went in quite a senior role. And whereas penguin is an enormous multinational corporation, you can become very expert at what is quite a small slice of the business at Gemini. I really started to understand how all the different parts of a publishing business work and plugged in with each other, which meant that when I started Do Re Mi with Anna, even if I didn't have a deep understanding of everything, I at least knew what I didn't know. You already had that awareness in place. And I think a lot of young businesses run into trouble when they are encountered by things they didn't know, they didn't know. You know, at least I felt I had a network. People to ask when there was something that I didn't understand, and that's that's put us in really good position

as a younger really beneficial stepping ground from, as you said, having like, a focused career at Penguin, to step in a little bit wider at Gemini, yeah, then being able to launch yourself into everything a business owner at Do Re Mi.

**Sam Voulters 05:17**

Exactly and there are always going to be things when you're founding a business that are completely unfamiliar and kind of scary, but, but, yeah, I'm really fortunate to have had that kind of interim step to understand how the publishing business works, because it's a fairly complicated business with supply chains and international rights deals and everything else distribution, of course. So yeah, still learning but enjoying it.

**Adam Stanley 05:41**

How about yourself? Zak, obviously slightly different. Start, shall we say, university student. And that's kind of, I believe, the concept where the whole idea came from. Do you want to just touch on how that concept came to and your I want to say business career previously, but it was quite a short and sudden one

**Zak Marks 06:03**

Yeah, this is, this is the first business I've ever really done. I had, like, I had a placement career. In my third year of uni, I was learning how to be a designer and, like, a family run furniture business, essentially. And I got my fingers into all sorts of pies, and I literally left that. And I was like, Okay, I was like, Okay, I want to be in a small business. I want to, I want to be able to do my own thing. I didn't even want to go back to my fourth year of uni. And I actually basically forced myself to go back because my parents and stuff said that you can't drop out. And it's like, okay, fine, I'll do, I'll do something with my time. I then get to my final year project, and they're like, all right, you have eight months to work on a project in four phases or three phases, whatever it was that you know you're going to have to care a lot about, because it needs to last this time. Needs to go through phases of iteration and everyone solves a problem. That's the key thing. And I had written in my iPhone notes for the last 20 years of my life at this time, you know, redesign the EpiPen, redesign the adrenaline pen, redesign the jack's pen, whatever it was that people are carrying with spherology, because my god is bulky, expires before you realize and no one carries it because they just forget it generally. So I thought, Okay, let's try this. Got about a month in before I realized I'm not a chemistry or biology or engineering grad. So I had no idea what I was doing with this piece of medication. So I was like, scrap that. What service can we build around the current medication that fills the gap? And that's where the idea of something like a defibrillator, but for allergies, comes into play, where it's really about the case, the kit, putting adrenaline pens in there, running it on subscription to make sure they're on date, providing training and providing incident reporting. So if they use the pens are replaced, and very much graduated with this concept in the end of 2020, covid graduations, click Submit on my laptop, my bedroom at home, and then I'm like, What do I do in my life?

**Adam Stanley 07:54**

So was it that rounded of a concept at that point? It was a because it sounds as the way you express it, there is, like, a fully fledged idea

**Zak Marks 08:04**

A fully fledged idea, yeah, like there was no address...

**Adam Stanley** 08:08

So many other considerations in that alone.

**Zak Marks** 08:11

Well, that's because I lived in it, so I knew the things that I had to do. But at that point in time, it was very techy. It was called Anna fought for anaphylaxis. It had a screen on the front which was like, Hello, are you having an emergency? Like, can I help you? Yeah, it was about to go on the wall in all sorts of places, manually, sorry, electronically. Track everything inside. Have an app which links you to find your nearest Anna. I graduated, and then I didn't want to touch it, because I was a student, and I was like, I'm doing, I don't know, look at my work again. I'm doing something fun. I essentially built freelance websites in that time, sort of on the side. So I ended up building a website for the project, which made it look a lot more real than it did. I got some interest in it. And then from there, I was like, right, how do I make this into a real thing if I did?

**Adam Stanley** 09:01

Yeah. So what was it was interesting, obviously, you had that, that kind of proof of idea, and the website thing, and it's kind of, I want to touch on you as well as you know, what was those eureka moments were like, actually, you know, I'm gonna, I'm gonna commit fully to this project that I built, or the idea, the concept of doing my own thing. What were those trigger points for you? Those turning moments around the corner. You're like, Do you know what I'm gonna I'm gonna take the jump, take the plunge and do it. Because obviously they are big decisions to be made. And you know for yourself, when you're, you know, relatively in the comfort of employment, you know, it's a huge decision. And so what were those I don't know whether it was sitting with a peer, a mentor, whomever it may be, a parent, right? Because we know your parents quite well. What was those? Where were those moments that just well, you know, I'm gonna go, go into this and commit,

**Sam Voulters** 09:56

I suppose one thing that's come up again and. Again over the last year since we've been doing this there are different kinds of validation. You know, from, from, from different types of people. Publishing is a really slow industry, you know, we've, we've had ideas for books a year ago, and we're still six months away from them going out into the world. But as we develop the idea for the kind of publisher that we wanted to be in, the kind of books that we are interested in, which I mean very broadly, is illustrator led books for very young children, board books and picture books inspired by Japanese and Korean illustration styles. And that is books that we're originating here with illustrators, but also acquiring books from those markets and translating them into the English language and then publishing them. So that was a kind of broad concept. And when I talk about validation, I mean when we put that idea in front of different groups of people, whether it was potential investors or my contacts from the book trade, that might be figures from the Booksellers Association that represent independent booksellers, or colleagues that I've worked with at different points in my career, having them just say, this feels timely. I understand what you're trying to do, and I know x retailer who is crying out for this kind of thing was enough for us to kind of keep going and putting energy into it and and that, and you sort of need that to keep feeding the idea. Because for us, there haven't been many of the very, very sort of tangible things yet. You know, we haven't put these books out into the market, and they haven't sold any copies yet.

We have lots of interest. We've had lots of great conversations. Vitamin phase, almost of this exactly. So that's the fuel that keeps us kind of going with it. But yeah, there have been key moments, and whether it was getting that investment early on is a huge boost and sort of gives us the license and leeway to kind of develop these ideas fully and invest in them with our time and energy. Or, you know, we're working with a. I don't want to get too much into the nuts and bolts of how the publishing industry works, but we've sold rights to some of our books to international publishers. So there are two Italian publishers who have bought rights to our books and will publish them in their own market. And that's another, that's another piece of validation that you get prior to publishing that's been really exciting for us.

**Adam Stanley** 12:25

How about yourself?

**Zak Marks** 12:27

In terms of the sort of, yeah, I mean, there's been a few moments along the way I think that I was blessed with the ability to live at home and not have any urgency because of covid. So there was a period of time where I literally did nothing but sit in my room and build what was a glorified pitch deck for the Anna idea. I didn't know what investment looked like. I just sort of said like, this is where I want to go. This is the market size. Give me money.

**Adam Stanley** 12:58

So did that deck also include ideas of financial projections and performance and stuff like that. Was it just...

**Zak Marks** 13:04

Still it's like, 1000s of defibrillators across the UK. The adrenaline market is this, you know, public figure I can find, and then be like, there's gonna be this many, yeah, I'm gonna sell this many units. I don't know how, yeah, how much money I need, but give me money. Yeah. You know, I went to a few, like, friends and family members, and family members, and they were like, What are you talking about? What's your business plan? Like, where's your route to market? Like, how do you prove this?

**Zak Marks** 13:26

But it's good because you went to those third parties to kind of give you...

**Zak Marks** 13:26

I talked about it with everyone, because I live with an allergy. So every day it would come up in conversation. And, you know, my dad was a massive supporter, and always gave me feedback and advice. And particularly, I would go on walks with friends and talk about it. And one friend, James was interested in business and finance and sales, and was working in a sales ed tech company, and basically got put on furlough at the ideal time to say what you're doing is really interesting. I have assisted with allergies, and I want to help you. And I was like, Okay, how? Because I have no idea. I'm sitting in my bedroom, but the two of us went in together, took what was the pitch deck, and we're like, Okay, how much money do we actually need to prove this? We essentially mapped out a pilot, which was, let's make it because I was a product designer, obviously. So I had some product design friends and an understanding of how to make a product. It was just the business stuff I didn't get. So it was like, right, if we make a prototype, 10 prototypes, we can test these in a couple schools and

learn. And that's a pilot, MVP, lean startup methodology. So that was the goal. We raised 150k with friends and family to say we're going to put this in schools and let you know what happens in six months. And we did exactly that. And I think that gave us the steam to say, right? If this man on the market wants something that puts adrenaline pens on the wall that, you know, even creates a conversation, they aren't used. Of course, the emergency scenario is rare, but it was the appetite that said, we can raise more money, we can build this properly in the UK, and we can do it right?

**Adam Stanley 14:58**

So did that. Obviously, I. Bringing James on and fit in that other half of what you needed, the business acumen side of it was that chance meeting, because I think you mentioned you knew of him already, yeah, it was just because of his relationship already and understanding of the allergies,

**Zak Marks 15:19**

yeah, kind of I needed someone that cared like I needed someone that cared. I almost had this mental checklist of people I knew that was like, could this person be a co-founder? Could this person be a co-founder? None of them were like, right? So they didn't really get far in my head. But then James was like, Can I help you with this? And that naturally developed into this perfect yin yang relationship, where a couple months on the line, I said, if you commit to this, I want you to be my co-founder. And then he was like, right? I'm gonna hand in my notice. And I said, I'm gonna stop doing freelance web design. And we both mucked in to go for this first round of funding that would then basically lead to everything else.

**Sam Vouters 15:51**

And that funding, I, you know, a round of funding, you know, getting yourself off the ground. That's such a focus point for a business at that stage right, that's, that's the moment that it turns from like an idea into something tangible. Because once there are other stakeholders involved, they give you their money and expect some back. At some point, you're like, oh, I don't have any excuses. And like, this is my job now, tangible validation. I've got to make it happen. And as part of that process, you know, I did that with accountants here, of kind of, you know, I was working on the marketing side in publishing in quite a creative role, had an understanding of how the business worked, but that was a really tough exercise of working out. Okay, so, what are all the assumptions we could even have in an established industry? What are all the assumptions about how many books we need to print, how many books we need to sell, how much we need to acquire for which markets they're going to go into? And then, you know, working with someone who's got an Excel brain, which I don't have to kind of map it all out and say, This is what year one looks like. This is what year two looks like. This is what year three looks like. And, you know, I didn't work with somebody with experience in publishing to go through that process with. But you know, someone who's got an analytical mind like that, and knows what startups require to get off the ground, was so valuable to us because it meant that when we got in front of investors, you know, there was something really tangible for them to look at. And they say, You know what? I see your vision, but I also see that you've done the rigorous work to make this make sense from a financial perspective. And that's something that Anna and I as founders couldn't have done on our own. We needed that support and to take us there instead,

**Adam Stanley 17:27**

It's a reward for your efforts. And you know, being an entrepreneur and a founder of your own business, and you know for yourselves, you've each got your respective partners, but it's still a very small knit business. And obviously there's the reports of entrepreneurship being quite lonely, because in some cases, you are just yourself. Fortunately for yourselves, you had other people to lean on to. You know, what are the risks and challenges or the sacrifices you guys have to make as new emerging business owners to kind of get to that point of that external validation from a third party, whether it be funding or whatever. How have you managed that? Especially, I think you mentioned covid, which is obviously a challenging time for everyone, but when you're going through those things as well as almost like that independence, going on a journey not independently yourself, because you had your partners, was that challenging from a mental side as well, let alone the business element, and trying to push something that you don't know at that point, whether it's going to have wings.

**Zak Marks 18:30**

Like the kit journey timeline right now is five years, basically and two and a half years of that was building for two and a half years we've now been launched. So there's like, this perfect middle balance where I can look back retrospectively and say, yeah, for two and a half years, I was basically in my room or with James or in his kitchen, you know, mostly no salary, only relying off investors that were like, here's a punt of our money. Please give it back, ideally with some, with some multitude and and looking at all my other friends and their jobs, you know, and their promotions and their salaries increasing, and they're this, and they're that, and me being like, should I have gone and worked in a website design company, or been a product design freelancer, or done something where I could have just, you know, progressively gone up the ladder, and now, you know, I can say five years down the line, I'm now ahead of other people, and not just in ambition, but also in a place in the company where I've employed eight to nine people now with an office, and at a stage where other people view it as a head and it's that mental game of knowing you're playing for the long term. Really, I think that's and being 21 22 23 years old, that wasn't easy, but I guess it definitely helped by my lack of pressure. Like I could live at home, and I could have covid, and I could have my friends and my family all supporting me, and just it was just like, right, this feels like the right thing to do. I'm just gonna, just gonna play it out, stuff,

**Sam Voulters 19:54**

no, no challenges, really, like, honestly, I just feel like a walk in the park. yeah. I mean, honest, honestly, like having worked in businesses and having line managers and the kind of pressure that comes from working in a big corporate, I just feel like to have the freedom at this stage of my career to do what we want to do, and we've got a very clear idea of what we're trying to do and a very clear vision, and we've got the funding we need, and we're just having so much fun doing it.

**Adam Stanley 20:29**

So it's quite an organic, natural step for you. Then it wasn't that whole, oh, I'm gonna do something that is typically deemed quite risky, because you were comfortable and confident in obviously your ability, which a lot of business owners are, obviously at the infancy stages.

**Sam Voulters 20:44**

But, and it's, and it's not a new idea, you know what would like there? There is a really rich track record culture in like in the UK, of independent publishing, and there's a really strong, supportive infrastructure around that, from independent bookshops to different organizations that sort of it's a very collaborative industry, and so when we showed up with this idea and had some attractive books to share with people, it was instant support all around and I feel like we're riding that wave at this stage. And yeah, of course, there are always going to be challenges when other people's money are involved, is involved, and there's going to be different kind of pressure, but certainly at this stage, when we're still building, and it's all it's all enthusiasm from all quarters, we've yet to encounter any of that adversity. It will come. I'm sure you mentioned building, and I think next year's a big year for you, because you've got 15 books due to be released, yeah, 15. But so you've just taken on, presumably, an editorial director to kind of plan for that well. So yeah, I mean, we're fortunate as well. You know, there's lots of things I love about the publishing industry. One of them that served us very well at this point is there's a really strong freelance culture, freelancing, permalancing, and lots of lots of experts who are happy to share their services with multiple different publishers. And so whether it's production or marketing or editorial we've had the benefit of working with some really, really experienced freelancers to help us get to this point. We have 15 books scheduled for 2026 as you say, and intention to publish 30 in 2027 so really, the editorial director, who we're, we've just hired and will be joining us at the beginning of November, will be, will be leading the charge to turn 15 books into 30 books, basically, in the following year. And then, you know, hiring a head of design as well to oversee kind of book cover design, among other things. And so really, I suppose we're, we're transitioning away from a culture of using predominantly freelancers to building a business for the long term.

**Adam Stanley 23:09**

And what those first signs as the business owners are going right? You know what? We need to gear up with more stuff. Obviously, taking on an employee is a greater commitment than a freelancer because they're less drop and go kind of thing, exactly. So where's, where did you find in your respective businesses, those first signs to say, You know what, we're a bit stretched here. We need to take someone on. And what was I saying for you from an employee perspective, editorial is that first employee, but obviously, who was your first hire? What was their role and responsibility and and what were his decisions behind being right, your number one employee, almost behind yourselves.

**Zak Marks 23:47**

Yeah. So I always knew I could take on a Product Marketing brand. I hated sales. Couldn't talk about sales. I was terrified to even talk about the thing. I just felt people should just come to me despite it, desperate to buy it, you know. Like, yeah, I didn't want to go up there and be like, please, please, please buy my kits you could do with this, you know, yeah, because it felt so pushy. I just wasn't used to that. And James, thankfully had the sales background, also very close mate in mind, Johnny, who was working in sales in various capacities, and actually an early investor in the business as well. And was always like, when you're ready, I will join. I will help you with the sales. So he was essentially employee number one, and that was great, because that was like a soft launch of To be honest, we brought him on in such an immature way, because, you know, the contract was this and that and the other, and he just sort of like, started coming along, and we worked in each other's kitchens because we knew each other three months.

**Adam Stanley 24:40**

Like, you still haven't signed your agreement,

**Zak Marks 24:41**

Yeah, but it helped us. And you know, on the side, we had our CTO, who's a friend of mine, called Simon, doing a PhD, not an employee, but sort of helping us. Fast forward to a couple years down the line. We officially launched in schools 2023 and we needed we. We then needed a proper employee, and that's when we went out on LinkedIn and started posting on because we've built a following. I think that's super important, from the early days of a startup, like talking about it, yeah, LinkedIn, personal brand for myself, Instagram content for the company, and then starting to put some ads out here and there. And organically, we found Olivia, who is now our sort of lead customer success, dealing with all our account management, doing all our, you know, 1000s of venues. And she is absolutely phenomenal. Worked her way up, her way up from, you know, years on the job. Now she was one girl in an office for three boys that knew each other really well. So God bless her. She, like really, really did well for herself. And since then, it was Laura four months ago, and then last month, dama and Felix both joined us. Simon is joining us full time in a month, and then we're scheduled to hire someone else as well. So we just moved into a new office twice the size, and the team's just growing due to the demand, really.

**Adam Stanley 26:00**

And that the team does create demand, as you say, Yeah, you know, yes, you hope that the product itself that you're selling obviously fulfills that demand, or they accelerate it. But for you as business owners, there's now this natural expectation that you are. You were looked up at. You are business owners, and how are you weighing those added responsibilities. You know, it's quite a change from being a founder based business to then going, I now have a staff of 10 people reporting to me, upwards. Yeah. You know, you've even mentioned it with the freelancers. You still have people who are reporting to you. How have you found juggling those responsibilities that weren't initially taken on?

**Sam Vouters 26:44**

I mean, I think we'll have different answers to this, because I've had teams for a while in my different roles. And I suppose the big distinction between my wife, Anna, and I and she's she's not worked in publishing, and she's been primarily a freelance illustrator to this point, so that's new to her, to have direct reports. And I'm much, I wouldn't say I'm hands off, but I I have learned over the years to give space to my team, to sort of be autonomous and to take ownership of certain things, and that's something that I don't have an instinct for, but I've had to learn of over the years. And so, yeah, that if it's your own business, you're a figurehead, and, you know, to some degree, and you know now I get get all these like, surprising requests to go speak at this university, or, you know, be interviewed for this publication, or be asked to be on this podcast. Thank you. But, but, yeah, I feel that that's something that I always try and remember, is like, if the difficult decision is hiring the right person and then giving them the space to kind of do their best work and and, you know, and I think that it's a balance to strike between leading and managing well and sort of dictating a vision for other people to follow, and kind of being too hands on with different aspects of the business. And really, the aspiration is to grow a business that works when we step back from it, you know, that operates successfully across the board. So, yeah, that's it's a challenge.

**Zak Marks 28:29**

I mean, my co founder, James, is getting married next year, and that'll be the first time quite a few of us in the business will all be away together at once, and it's like, okay, in a year's time, is this going to run itself for a week because it's going abroad as well. Yeah, it's that weird. Hand off.

**Adam Stanley 28:46**

That faith in has said your your juniors, almost your staff, yeah, to continue that idea and the goal that you created, but the office and the wheels keep turning,

**Zak Marks 28:57**

Yeah? And seeing, like I said, like Olivia coming in, and then, like, you know, a year or two later, even like, being a totally different person and entirely more confident, Laura joined us on Dragon's Den day, like she literally her first day was our Dragon's Den screening. That was crazy for her. Now, three months later, going from someone who was confident but not knowing really what she was doing, she's like, leading the calls day in, day out.

**Adam Stanley 29:22**

How have you found it so I'm gonna put a kind of experience that I've had personally. So I've been at SRV for 20 years, and so when I joined, we were, you know, 11 partners, 80 odd employees. But I joined, and you could tell immediately it was family orientated. It had that everyone knew everyone, and we still know everyone's faces. But as part of scaling up and growth within employees, they said, 20 years later, we're now 2425 partners with 250 and trying to maintain or or hold on to that family ethos, that culture is challenging. You. I'd like to say, we do it very well. All our partners. Doors are open. You can walk in. You can have a chat with them, socially or professionally. How are you managing that transition, almost from the founder led entrepreneurial spirit camaraderie of a startup, to that slowly getting, organically, bigger, and you're still trying to hold on to that camaraderie, because it's, it's kind of a value that is rare, yeah, to have, and it's that everyone mucks in together. And as you grow, it's harder and harder to keep hold of.

**Zak Marks 30:37**

I mean, we had four of us for them, for our old office, previously, two co-founders, you know, two sales people, Johnny and Olivia, me and James. And we basically do everything together at all times. And then this new office, we now have basically four sales people. What is going to be, you know, four people over there doing like, customer account management, tech compliance, and then, like me and James here. And so we still oversee everything, and we're part of everything, but we're, for the first time, we're removed, and recently, in the last few weeks, we've put in like, a founders lunch once a week, because, like, we actually need time to step away for everyone else and sort of just talk ourselves.

**Adam Stanley 31:10**

Is it weird for you as well, being almost separated from the rest of the practice or the business at that point?

**Zak Marks 31:18**

We're still like, you know, we're like, right there. But it's, I think it's more the attitudes that we have to bring across in, like setting up an HR system and having payroll. That's not just three

of us, suddenly, eight of us and and, yeah, well, with with the new hires we're bringing in the next few months, I think what's going to be really exciting is the business will start to see a bit of a split, like, it's not just everyone in the team doing the same thing sales, just, you know, we're going to have actual like functions, and then, you know, Christ, we're a few hires away from like departments, which terrifies me. I don't want to do that, but yeah, it's been organic, and it's been nice. And also, you know, like, demand led as well. Like, we're not hiring for the sake of hiring. It goes both ways with bringing in people and they create the work. But also, like, you need to need the people before you hire them.

**Adam Stanley 32:03**

Inevitably, with growth comes cost, right? And I think you touched on it earlier. We talked about finance. What were the options that you looked into regarding expansion and having that financial support, whether it be as you said, Please can have some money, and I will give it that due, maybe some more or sorry, more formal. What were the options that you both kind of looked at, discovered, maybe, in some cases, ruled out, because it wasn't in keeping with what you wanted or what you wanted to sacrifice.

**Sam Voulters 32:27**

I think for us, it didn't feel like we had multiple options. I think we weren't in a position to take out a big loan to launch the business. I think from early on, we were looking for investors, and because of our experience, we weren't looking at VCs. It was, it was kind of thinking about who within our network might be keen on supporting a creative business

**Adam Stanley 33:05**

with yourself like a proven track record as well

**Sam Voulters 33:10**

Well, yeah, sort of a proven track record. But then again, there's lots of people who work in publishing who have been MDS at different departments or bigger publishers for longer. And might, you know, might find it easier to find investors to believe in them. I suppose what distinguished us was the kind of vision for the type of publishing which I think even people from outside the industry sort of got quite quickly and understood that it's a kind of unique selling point of what we're trying to do, gap in the market. Yeah. So, so, you know, we, we did what I think most young businesses do, which is, you know, you just got to go out and ask the people that you know and the people that they know and and so I had lots and lots of kind of slightly disappointing, coffees with people where they were like, oh, you should speak to this person. They're not going to give you any money, but they'll be really good to speak to, but they might know someone else who will exactly, exactly.

**Adam Stanley 34:17**

And how did you find managing those relationships? Like, even if it is someone going, okay, yeah, I am willing to just pluck a number to 50 grand, I'm willing to give you 50 grand, and then manage their expectations. And what were the expectations of reporting to them and going, okay, yeah, that's going to cover us for however long. And it's you mentioned earlier about business kind of approaches,

**Sam Voulters 34:33**

Yeah so our experience with Do Re Mi was, you know, it was very collaborative with the team here at SRLV. And, you know, we, we relied on their support to map out what we thought that those first and publishing is, you know, there's a lot of upfront costs. You know, you're talking about printing, you're talking about acquiring books or paying advances to illustrators and authors, and these might be products that you won't, that won't generate any revenue. For another 18 months to two years, a long lead time. Yeah, and so it's the there's a lot of upfront costs, so we needed a lot of guidance around how to kind of map that out, and how many years we wanted to kind of forecast, to show you know our financial needs and and we came up with a number, and we thought, we don't want to do multiple rounds. We want to ideally get all our investment upfront that we think will serve us until we're generating enough to pay for ourselves. Self sufficiency, exactly, and, and, really, you know, SRLV were totally invaluable with that and, and, and helped us, you know, even made intros to a couple of people that they thought might be interested in that kind of business. And so we had those conversations, and that was really valuable, and that set us on our way.

**Adam Stanley 35:53**

And you are on your way. You're, you know, planning that said next year, 15, 30 years after.

**Sam Vouters 35:59**

Yeah, and I think that you know when you're talking about the hires and the people that you want to kind of get involved in a business. Publishing is an IP business. You know, once you have the product there and it continues to sell, it generates revenue. So, everything starts with your title. Count how many books you're publishing. And so always, for us, it felt like our first hire needed to be an editorial director, someone that someone that could add to the title count. Because if you've got 30 books, it's going to generate more revenue than 15 books, and then the other departments within the business will support that. So once you've got more books, you need more people out on the ground selling them. You need more marketing support. You need more publicity support. You need more production resources to be able to make the books, but it all starts with that editorial role. So it was very clear to us, that's the person we needed to get in first.

**Adam Stanley 36:48**

And your funding was...

**Zak Marks 36:50**

Our funding is different. Journey, puzzle pieces, yeah. So the first 150 grand, like I mentioned, or around about, I can never remember the exact figures, but that got us pilots. We then went for about 300 grand, which took us to and you know, these were numbers we came to because we did the work. We plugged in. How much do we need to get us to this certain point? James was always on Excel. James was always on Excel. We also used a lot of health matters as well. And you know, my brother in law, who is very, very good at this sort of stuff as well, worked in investment for a while, and we were also really set on particularly in the early days. You know, we needed 100 grand to make injection mold tools in the UK. We wanted our kits to be made in the UK out of recycled plastic as early and quickly as possible, rather than outsourcing cheaper ones to China. So we do that sort of thing. Sustainability side, yeah, you know, we make the software in house. Everything we do is really homegrown and organic. And so that 300k got us to the point where we could mass manufacture kits in the UK. We chose a manufacturing partner, we could pay some

developers, and we could have a sales team and go to conferences and markets and from there, I think there are some cash flow dips and some over expectations of startup life that suddenly were like, shit, we need some more money. We had some friends and family that were keen to put in again. I think after these conversations, you know, you go and meet people, you never know if they're going to set you up with someone else. Invest 20 grand investors, grand like we have one of our sort of, I guess low ticket investors has been one of the most helpful, because they give us all of their digital marketing resource. Whereas we have some really, like, high ticket investors that we rarely speak to, just because they're like, I'm going to give you a lot of cash. I'm really proud of what you're doing, but I don't have a lot to say, yeah. And then from there, obviously, the final round was sort of Dragon's Den, and that came with everything. It really came with really.

**Adam Stanley 38:35**

And what do you think you learned from each round of process, by each funding round effectively, assuming there's, there's experiences you picked up as part of that whole kind of going to market, like, Hey, this is our product. You want to be willing to invest, and you do it a few times, what you picked up as you've gone a long way, let alone the learning experiences from...

**Zak Marks 38:54**

I mean, then valuation early on is like gold dust, as it literally demotes how much equity you have in the business and how much you need to raise, obviously. And so as the more rounds come in, your equity dilutes, and suddenly you're looking at yourself and your co-founder, and you're like, oh shit, do we have enough equity in this business? And we do. And you know, you have to be careful and map. And we're at the point now where we don't want to fundraise again, because we are actually becoming profitable and sustainable as a business. But I think in those early days, valuation is, at first, a finger in the air, you know, what is the market saying? Where's our potential? Yeah, what are we looking at? And then the other thing is, you know, we turned down investors that weren't going to be good for us, but wanted to put in the money. And we've been in situations where it's all about choosing the right people for the right reasons, because everyone that's on our cap table genuinely cares about allergy, genuinely likes me and James and trusts us with the steering of the business. We like them, we communicate with them, and most of them react. You know. Every round they put in a bit more money they want to maintain or even increase their stake, because they love us and believe in us, and they're excited about the potential of their exit, obviously. So I think with that, yeah, choosing the right people early on and making sure you don't just take people for their money, super important.

**Adam Stanley 40:15**

If we go past and said funding, we're now in a consistently profitable position, obviously, with the launch next year. Launch next year, and you're in that profitable position. Now, what do you see as being the challenges in your respective markets? You know Sam, for instance, I have three young kids, and I love every evening sitting down. They each choose a book. We sit down before bedtime and read them. But I've noticed, certainly with my elder two, that there's obviously a huge shift towards digital, certainly in the school place, because they're expected to do their homework. Yeah, some of it's pen and paper, but a lot of it is reading on an iPad or whatever it may be. Do you see that as being one of the challenges for you, or actually, because of your focused age group, I'm not necessarily going to sit down with my

kids at bedtime with an iPad and be like, let's read this. You'd like to have something tangible. They get to go to the shelf and pick a book. Yeah, you still have other challenges. Perhaps. You know, you talk about translating your books and the IP things. What do you think of those big...

**Sam Voulters** 41:21

There are some existential things about reading for children. And you know, there's a study done recently about fewer children reading for pleasure. And the government has responded to that. Recently. They've declared 2026 The Year of Reading. And there are all kinds of initiatives around that. And labor, I think, has committed in the last couple of days to every primary school having its own library by the end of this current term. So I think things are being done to encourage reading in early years. Yes, there is, there is obvious, obviously, so much competing for young children's attention, but books for young children, it tends to be quite a robust part of the market, you know, depending on what the economic situation is, you do see dips in in terms of adult book buying, but whether it's parents or grandparents or carers or or birthday presents, kids books has stayed pretty robust. I think that there are all kinds of challenges around that. And I think that, as any founder will tell you, you want to diversify your revenue streams as much as possible, and one of those revenue streams for us is selling rights to our books. So even if we're not selling physical products, or we are selling physical products, but alongside selling physical products, there are publishers around the world who would be interested in our IP and publishing it in their local languages, and so we're interested in selling that to them. And then also, there are books that we're publishing where we expect there would be interest from production companies to adapt into TV, film, toys, whatever else it is. It's a great ambition. It won't be all of our books, but if it's one or two over the next few years, that will be amazing for us, because it's all self-sustaining. And if you touch on something different, you know, if there are different touch points for your content, you know, in books, but also on the iPad, you know, it really strengthens your position in the market.

**Adam Stanley** 43:37

Essentially you mentioned, like the diversification and being able to utilize that IP in other places and other domains. You know, you mentioned production. I automatically think of the TV, BBC, iPlayer, Julia Donaldson, just being able to sit the kids in front of the TV when I just need half an hour to myself to have a cup of tea. Yeah, there we go. There's the Gruffalo. And I said it's been able to diversify and split everything...

**Sam Voulters** 44:00

It's everything, you know, it's Peppa Pig, it's unicorn Academy. These are all. These are all book series that have done hugely well. And I think that it's where children's TV production companies look, you know, they look to the publishing industry for new IP and to help them generate ideas that are going to work, not only for TV, but for online games or whatever.

**Adam Stanley** 44:21

Theater as well, no greater than Harry Potter. I mean, yeah, absolutely. And how about yourself? Because obviously you've got trademarks and everything in place to try and protect your position in the market. Yeah, is that quite nicely secure? What kind of threats or challenges? Yeah, that means that you're trying to defend against or even opportunities.

**Zak Marks 44:41**

Perhaps one of the really early things that secured our I guess, feeling around the kit was we got reached out to by the pharma company that makes adrenaline pens, and said, Hey, we love this solution. Can we? Can we provide pens? You do the kits and the training, you run the subscription, and, you know, voila. It's a great business model, and we have a guaranteed exclusive agreement with them. Them. So we're the only people that are making kits. They're going to be the only people supplying pens to us. And I think equally as well with the actual kits themselves. Of course, they're protected trademarks. But we do. You know, we have 1000 customers across the UK, ranging from the Royal Albert Hall to Alton Towers resort, Compass Group catering, which has it in stadiums like the o2 arena and Tottenham Hotspur all the way through to your primary school and secondary schools down the road.

**Adam Stanley 45:32**

Yeah, I was at Chessington day, and we stayed at the hotel for one night, and we just walked into the restaurant. I had to stop and take a picture of it

**Zak Marks 45:34**

And send you down the side. And the more visible the kits are, our brand equity is really strong right now, because we've done a lot of that today, of activation across that. But I think you know really importantly, that our customers sign for five years with us, so we get a guaranteed subscription revenue every single year from them. When they replace the pens, we know they're going to stay with us, and they're not going to run away and have an empty kit or something, and that protects them. And once they see our service, and once they know they're going to get everything I'm on the training, the pens, the kit, they wouldn't go anywhere else anyway. So it's a really strong position.

**Adam Stanley 46:06**

Nice. So if we think about reflection and where you guys have got to now, what do you think? What's one decision you're most proud of, and one decision you find difficult, one wonders, you do differently?

**Zak Marks 46:21**

I think that one thing I do differently is look into the design and trademark better, because we were about 100 150 kits in like, I can't remember when this was, maybe a year into launching, and we got in, we got an email from the Head of International Law at the Red Cross saying that we'd infringed on their logo with our orange plus on our kit. And we had to, well, it was very scary for one but we had to send out stickers to all our customers, get them to change the logo. We had to change our logo on the website. We had to do a whole bunch of stuff, and, you know, go back to them. And then recently, as well, we changed our lock and key system, and they've made us change the design of that as well. And it also felt it was infringing on Yes, and they didn't want that, you know, we were saying, oh, you know, it's just a medical logo. They were like, yes, but we kind of created that medical logo. That's why people know us, yeah, yes. So we now have a good relationship with them. We've solved it all, but I think that was a bit of a headache. And to be honest, it's again to say, I know none unknown, unknowns, you can't prepare for everything. But yeah, that would have been something we probably should have looked into a bit more on the main symbol of our business, being the head of the Red Cross Geneva Protocol. In terms of what was it the

most proud of? Yeah, life saved. Like, yeah. At this point, we have 19 lives saved with the kits as of last week, which was a gel pen exploding in a child's mouth, causing their tongue and throat to swell up because of death and like, yep, Whoa, yeah. And they obviously didn't know about that. The school didn't know about that, but they had a kit, and they used it before that. We've had, you know, bee stings, we've had exercise, we've had ginger beer. We've had whether it's a three year old or a 53 year old, all different scenarios of whether it's in the school or a workplace, lives saved because someone had a severe reaction. And the Burt one that occurred six months into launching was like the one where we all cried, and we're all like, Holy fucking shit, this is a, this is this is a really big like, this is this works. Talk about validation. That was validation. Yeah, most proud of that. I'm most proud of knowing that that's just going to keep happening. No allergic reactions. We give the training, we give the awareness. Hopefully people will avoid them, but sometimes they simply cannot be avoided. And the last thing you can do is have an adrenaline pen, which hopefully, most of the time works all then.

**Adam Stanley 48:43**

Lots of unknown. I guess some of these occurrences happen because they've got no pre existing tendency to flare up. Yeah, and it's just an event that...

**Zak Marks 48:52**

The co-factors are a big thing people don't know about. You can be stressed, tired on your period, have a cold and flu, and it does exactly something else. Yeah. So you could sort the ginger beer. Instance, was a 50 year old woman who had a chest infection and was really stressed and really tired and drank a ginger beer, which she drank many times in her life, and then suddenly she couldn't breathe, and she never had that for her life, and she had no known allergies. And it's not like she's allergic to ginger beer, it was just the multitude of factors, the cocktail within all those factors. So yeah, just raising awareness that we want kits to be very different. Burt is next door neighbor, because it's not just people that know they have allergies. It's really anywhere. And like you said, you saw one in Chessington. You know, we're getting there.

**Sam Voulters 49:30**

Yeah, absolutely. I guess the thing is, that was, that was a gamble when starting this business. We had a lot of advice that was, you know, this is, it's going to be a challenging thing to do. Start small, dip your toe into a couple books. See how, see how it goes. And. We were very committed to being ambitious when we launched, and we had the understanding that we would only be taken seriously by the partners that we relied on to get our books out there. If we went in with a lot of books and said, you know, we're worth paying attention to, because we've got 15 books coming next year, and we want to. We want a seat at the table, basically. And we want that meeting with Waterstones, or whoever it might be, that and, you know, publishing is very egalitarian. There are all kinds of small companies and authors out there that might self publish a book, or a small publisher that might have one or two books a year, and they sort of go into a bit of a different pile, and we didn't want to be in that pile. We wanted to work with the big distributors, the proper sales agencies. And to do that, we had to commit and I'm really proud that we did do that, even though we slightly been flying by the seat of our pants to do so 15 books next year is incredible. Yeah, it's a lot of I mean,

**Adam Stanley 50:59**

you're flying well by the team.

**Sam Voulters** 51:00

Yeah, thanks very much. Yeah, it is. It's been ambitious, but we're really glad to have taken that approach. I suppose, in terms of things that haven't gone so well, it's difficult. Publishing is a business of small decisions. You know, you're making lots and lots of decisions every day about what format a book's going to be, what you're going to do about this illustration, the title, the you know, how things are presented, whether it's going to go into that market, into that space. And so you just hope that you get most of them right. And I feel we're gaining experience every day. There are definitely things that we've overspent on. We've worked with the wrong person for this, that or the other. We've made a poor decision about a format that's not going to work well for a certain market, but hopefully none of them are critical and that's what we can kind of iterate around and address as we kind of develop as a business and we publish more books.

**Adam Stanley** 51:59

So to finish, to wrap up, if you could give your younger self, or even a new entrepreneur, or someone who's thinking about taking a plunge, shall we say, taking the jump, and they've had that almost eureka moment that we talked about earlier, what advice would you give them? What kind of encouragement? Words of encouragement, would you say, or something to look out for? She said, No, maybe for you, it's the trademark thing. But outside of those, from a business acumen standpoint, would you say most, most important?

**Zak Marks** 52:30

Wanna go first?

**Sam Voulters** 52:31

Yeah. I mean, the one that I don't know if it fulfills all of your criteria, but it's, it's a boss of mine shared this with me one point when I was leaving to go off to another job, and the way that he put it was separate the message from the messenger, and the way that he meant it was you might have preconceptions in your mind about where good advice or information is coming from, and it might make you quite blinkered about accepting that advice or feeling positively about kind of other influences, and that's just been really, really valuable to me, because you never know where good advice is going to come from. And yeah, we all have to, you know, our prejudices, in some way, are kind of useful. That's what keeps us on track, and that's, that's what, that's our focus. But by allowing yourself to be receptive to advice that your instinct might be to dismiss, I feel has been really, really valuable to me in launching this business, because you never know where good advice is going to come from.

**Adam Stanley** 53:36

Very eloquently put. Very nice. Yeah, you got to follow that now.

**Zak Marks** 53:40

Yeah, that was good. That was good. I think I have two pieces of advice that I give very, very frequently, which is, why should somebody care about what you do? Like? Why do they care about what you do? And the easiest way to do that from my personal experience, is to give personal experience like, I hate seeing a startup or an idea or a concept or a business that is just like a blank website. Here's our product. Well, like a salesperson's like, this is what we

do. Who are you and why should I care about you? Yes, so telling my story and leading with my experience, which is not business or anything, but it's why I care, and therefore it shows people why they should care is so much more valuable than this is how many things I've done, or how many kits we have out the door, like people always care about the mission and be bought into that tell a story, right? Yeah, literally, tell a story and that, yeah. And that will only grow over time as well, which is great compounds, and that helps you build your personal brand. And that leads me to my second point, which is, build a brand like from day dot put yourself out there. Start building traction. Show people what you're doing. Talk to people. It's how I got my co-founders, how I got early investors, like building that website, and showing social media. Just start putting yourself out there. And then, you know, we did a pilot. That was one of the best things we could have done. We didn't, you. Jump into the gate, raising 500 grand for a techie product. We literally did the smallest amount of money with the smallest little plastic box, just to show that it was what it was. Just get moving as quickly as possible so that you're not what should I do? How should I do it? Am I a perfectionist that stumps so many lovely business ideas that I see.

**Sam Vouters 55:23**

Perfection is the enemy of good, right? Then that's something that I feel like stumps people all the time, and you can spend ages trying to perfect something, but actually, as a founder, you've just got to keep progressing. And sometimes you've just got something's got to be good enough, and you move on. And if you need to come back and address it later on. It's an iterative process.

**Adam Stanley 55:43**

Yeah, certainly stump growth and commerciality, like trying to put that perfectionist attitude into my world and what we do. You know, yes, I strive for it. I love it. But also sometimes it's not worth me trying to chase down where that 5p gone. It's 5p it's not going to make an odds worth difference at the end of the day, and it's just having a broader understanding of the commercial sense that hits it. I did say that final question, but you mentioned something about Yes, building a brand, and obviously we touched on how you kind of went through a rebranding. Yes, right? Which is, which is quite interesting, because how difficult is it to start down one track and then pivot to something else that obviously takes quite a lot of consideration? Yeah? This is an extra. It's the encore.

**Zak Marks 56:34**

Yeah, God. I mean, I would say that that alludes very well to the point of just just getting started. Because I think so many businesses are like, oh, what should I? What should I call my business? And where should I, you know, we just, it was a university project. I came up with a name for Anna. It was short, a fan of relaxation.

**Adam Stanley 56:52**

It worked flexibility still at that point as well.

**Zak Marks 56:52**

Yeah, yeah. And we get to a point where I find out Anna is, is a, you know, not a good name for the business for various reasons, one of which it's, it's a, it's a, it's a cream that people use for certain areas of the body. It's a domain we can get properly. And it's, we're called Anna dot systems. Like people, they had a full stop. It wasn't good for so many reasons. And

with that, we knew the product, the physical thing, was developing as well. So it was actually my dad that came up with the name for Kitt, which I don't think many people know, really, he just said, just call it a Kitt. It's a kit. And I was like, Okay, well, it's available. And now people still spell it with all capitals, and they think it's an acronym and here and that the other but no, it's just an anaphylaxis kit. And the rebrand for that was really fun, because it allowed us to do things in stages and relaunch and gives another piece of excitement for people to hold on to. So and, yeah, there were things like, you know, getting that ready for, like, the big launch for then, like, Dragon's Den, where we changed the product again, and all these times where it's getting something out there, and then you can change it, and it's fine.

**Sam Voulters** 57:54

And the thing about branding, you know, like, the real value of a brand, and what brand really means is actually who you are in the eyes of your audience, rather than your logo, your name, and actually, you've been very good at building a narrative around what it is that you do. So actually, whether you're called Anna or Kitt doesn't really make too much of a difference, because you're telling that same story, yeah, and it's connecting with people in the same way, yeah, more difficult to do when you're very, very established, I think, yes, but at the same time, as long as you stay true to the story and people have that same connection with what it is that you're trying to do, that's really where the brand equity comes from.

**Zak Marks** 58:34

Which is where you see companies like Jaguar just flushing it down the toilet with their rebrand, or like Starlink bank spending millions to change their typefaces. Yeah, it's not about that stuff.

**Adam Stanley** 58:44

Big impact at that level as well. Yeah, what is this? Yeah. Well, thank you very much to both of you for your time today.

**Sam Voulters** 58:53

Thank you.

**Zak Marks** 58:53

Thank you very much.