



POWDERKEG PODCAST TRANSCRIPT : EMERSON SPARTZ

Intro: Emerson Spartz has hunted down and capitalized on patterns in business since he was 12 years old.

Fast-forward 18 years, and Spartz is the CEO of Dose, a digital media company that reaches 200 million Millennials every month with content designed to provide fresh ideas, knowledge and perspectives. Spartz is also one of the world's leading experts on virality, having extensively studied its patterns and used what he learned to build his media company that was once composed of more than 30 unique websites.

In our interview, Spartz lets me in on his secrets for effectively learning new information, his best strategies for negotiating deals, the power of doing “comfort zone challenges,” and of course, how virality really works. He's an extremely well-read guy who's practically bursting at the seams with knowledge, and I'm grateful that he's more than willing to share some of his insights.

Head over to Spartz's personal website to connect with him and learn more about his journey, and please enjoy the interview to learn about virality and the power of patterns in business.

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Matt: I want to jump right into this, because I'm really excited to touch base since the launch of Dose. I've followed from afar, but I know that there's a lot of strategic decisions made in doing

the rebrand to Dose and putting everything behind that brand. Could you give me, as a quick way of jumping in here, your 30-second elevator pitch on what Dose is and what kind of scale you guys have right now?

Emerson: Dose is one of the world's fastest growing digital media companies. Our content informs, entertains and inspires roughly 200 million people every month. We target a younger audience. Under 30 is kind of our sweet spot, so young Millennials and Generation Z. Our mission is to build a media company that aims higher than entertainment alone and introduces fresh ideas, knowledge and perspectives.

Matt: It's almost like you were prepared for that one.

Emerson: You have no idea how many times I've said that.

Matt: [laughing] No, I can probably guess. I would love to jump in and learn a little bit more about Dose, but...since you and I had a chance to collaborate back when I was at Social Reactor, and you were doing some of the things with OMG Facts, I always kind of wondered how you got to where you are. Of course, I read your bios and watched some of your interviews and talks that you've given, but one of the things I would love to explore is your journey to there. I've always been curious about how you went from a middle school dropout to running what is now impacting 200 million people every month. What was that decision—back when you were 12 years old—what was that like, and why did you make that decision?

Emerson: I was intensely bored in school, and I was one of those kids who...in reading class, we'd be assigned to read a chapter a week, and I'd read the whole book in that week, and then I would get reprimanded in class for reading other things during class, because I was bored. One of my friends started homeschooling, and I thought that sounded amazing. You just spend all day learning about whatever you want to learn about. I talked my parents into letting me give it a shot. I think, in their minds, they were like, "Well, he's a smart kid. He's not going to fall too far behind if he's just screwing around all day. We'll just throw him back in school. So, we'll just run an experiment here." It really wasn't anything more complex than that.

Matt: That's pretty awesome that you had parents that were that open to trying something very, very alternative.

Emerson: My dad's a total hippie.

Matt: Is he? So what's your mom like? Is she equal parts hippie, or is there kind of a good balance there?

Emerson: No. She's definitely much more of the balance.

Matt: Dude, that's hilarious. My parental complex is very similar, with my dad being a little bit more hippie and out there, and my mom being very much more, you know: "Did you get straight A's?"

Emerson: Yeah. Yin and Yang, gotta have that balance. My mom was the one who was like, "No, you should do chores. Chores will teach you valuable lessons." And my dad was like, "Chores? What valuable lessons do you learn cleaning toilets? Go build something. Go create something. Go learn something."

Matt: That sounds like you were a very directed 12-year-old. I was doing comic books in class. The fact that you had the wherewithal to think about launching what you launched...could you maybe tell us how you came up with the idea for what became MuggleNet?

Emerson: Yeah. I didn't really come up with an idea. I just started making stuff, and then it just kind of happened. I came across a free webpage maker, and I thought it would be fun to make a website, so I started making a bunch of crappy websites about things that I wasn't that into, like a Simpsons website and a golf website. It was called Xtreme Golf with an X and no E, because I thought that was super cool. I wasn't really passionate enough about any of them to put in the time to make them good. But then I read Harry Potter, and I got really obsessed with it. And then, bam, it was like this...the clouds parted and the sun shined through, and I suddenly found enough motivation to start working on it for eight hours a day. It turns out, if you work on any passion project for eight hours a day over an extended period of years, it will probably, eventually, not suck. And that's exactly what happened.

Matt: [laughing] That's probably an oversimplification of what happened, but I actually love that. Because I think so many people, especially in what we do with Verge—we're a community of 5,000+ tech entrepreneurs, developers and investors—we've got people that will be interested in that first-time entrepreneurship, jumping in, "How do I make this happen?", and it's as simple as finding that thing you're willing to put 8+ hours a day into for an extended period of time. And I think that last part, "extended period of time," is so key. How long was it before MuggleNet really popped?

Emerson: It depends on what you mean by "popped." It was always growing. Within about a month of starting, there was, like, nobody coming to the site. I was like, "Well, this is really pointless to make this thing if no one's going to come to it. How do I get people to come to it?" I just looked at all the other Harry Potter sites and what they were doing, and I saw that some of them had these things called "affiliates" where they would link to each other. I was like, "Oh, that seems pretty straightforward. They just link to each other." Then I went and I emailed every single Harry Potter webmaster on the entire internet. And I do mean all of them. And there were no search engines back then, so it was just me clicking on links for hours, and hours, and hours, and then sending canned emails to them. Within a month, people started to show up at the site, and things started to take off from there. That being said, it grew steadily for years. I didn't

actually start bringing on people to help me...I eventually grew the size of the team to about 120. I didn't really start bringing people on until about six months to a year after I started.

Matt: You say that it was kind of like a steady growth, and it didn't have that sort of pop, which is kind of contradictory to what I would've assumed given your expertise in virality. It sounds like you were probably gradually learning around the way. What not only is good content, but how do you get people to see that content?

Emerson: Yeah, I certainly didn't—I didn't know anything about virality at the time. I never even heard of the word. I learned painfully slowly. One of my favorite quotes is the Einstein quote: "I have no special talents. I am merely passionately curious." That's really what it was. I wasn't doing anything with virality in the early days, but then I just kept studying what patterns were working with content and what patterns weren't, and then got better at it over time and started to formulate more theories on how to systematize virality. So, yeah, there was definitely no overnight success with MuggleNet. Definitely not.

Matt: Set the scene for me, Emerson, because you're not in school, you're spending 8+ hours a day on MuggleNet, which probably didn't make money in the early days. Is that right?

Emerson: Correct.

Matt: OK, so you're working on this hobby site. Your parents have given you free reign to follow your passion. Where are you? Are you in your bedroom? Are you in an office at home? Are you at the library? Where are you building this empire from?

Emerson: I was in the living room. My mom always jokes that she only ever saw the back of my head through my adolescence. [laughing] We had one computer. Everyone shared the one computer, and I would basically just hog the computer.

Matt: That's awesome for you. I'm sure your family felt otherwise at the time.

Emerson: Probably at times, I'm sure. But in general, my parents were so supportive, and they just loved to see that I was so passionate about this thing, and I was working on it. They didn't really understand what it was or what it meant, but they certainly understood what it was and what it meant when we got the first check that came in for, like, \$6,000.

Matt: How far into the project were you when that check came in the mail?

Emerson: That was probably a year and a half after I started. I didn't know you could make money before then. I didn't think that was a thing that people actually did. I just thought people made websites for fun.

Matt: Absolutely. Well, and they do. It's fun when they make money, too, right?

Emerson: That's exactly what I thought.

Matt: Very cool. It sounds like you were very self-taught. You're testing, you're looking at other things and what's working online. Were there any mentors that you came across in those first couple of years that really helped you think about opening this up into a business?

Emerson: I didn't know anybody. I was in rural Indiana. I was surrounded by 270° cornfields. Literally—my house was right by 270° of cornfields. I had zero network whatsoever, outside of the online friends that I was making with all these other Harry Potter webmasters. But I did have significant mentorship. My mentorship was highly unusual. My parents pretty much stayed out of my way and let me study whatever I wanted, but one thing they did do, which was really smart, is they had me read four short biographies of successful people every day. This just shattered my little 12-year-old brain into about ten thousand pieces, and it really laid the foundation for everything that came after. I started to think really big, and I decided that I wanted to change the world. I wanted to do it on a massive scale. I just began further immersing myself into the lives of people who had already changed the world to see what patterns I could extract from their experiences. I learned a tremendous amount from them, living their lives vicariously. One of my all-time favorite quotes is that "You're the average of the five people you spend the most time with." Because I was spending several hours a day living vicariously as people who changed the world, you start to think like, "These people changed the world. Why couldn't I change the world?"

Matt: Absolutely. So you're literally reading four full-length biographies, or are they, like, short—

Emerson: No, magazine-length biographies.

Matt: OK. And were these curated by your parents, or were these...you know, "You can read whatever bios you want. You just gotta go and find four a day."?

Emerson: In my parents' infinite wisdom, they realized the merits of letting me select the biographies myself. They just said I could read any ones that I wanted, as long as there were four. So, in the beginning, I read only—and I mean literally only—athlete biographies. At the time, I wanted to be the next Michael Jordan, and I played a lot of sports competitively as a kid growing up, too.

Matt: Well, and you're from Indiana, man. Like, basketball capital of the world.

Emerson: Yeah, no kidding.

Matt: OK, so, a lot of sports ones. Are there one or two bios that really stand out to you now as formative in those early years?

Emerson: Not really. Narrative-wise, it sounds like there should've been. I just learned so much about so many different people, so many different walks of life. I kind of wanted to do everything, experience everything. At one point, I decided I wanted to learn everything there was to learn about the world, and so I decided to read the encyclopedia. But I got, like, to A-C—letter A and then C—and I was like, “Man, this shit is boring.” I was like, “I should go read other things instead.” But the biographies [inaudible]. I was like, “I could become a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, or I could become a world famous athlete,” or, you know, etc. Like, “Hm, which of these should I become?”.

Matt: Absolutely. It gives you different perspectives. You know, even if you're not going to become a biochemist, reading a bio about a biochemist—not to be too confusing about the prefix there—but, if you're reading a biography about a biochemist, seeing how they succeeded in their field obviously has direct implications to how you might succeed in your field, or what you're doing.

Emerson: Totally. You see the same patterns coming up over, and over, and over again.

Matt: I think that's so important, too, especially in a world now where there's so much media and so much content being created that you could only pay attention to tech content all day, and it would fill up your entire time. That perspective of—at least, what worked for you—taking a little bit from a lot of different places kind of created this overarching paradigm or construct that allowed you to succeed in what you're doing.

Emerson: Absolutely. Very much so. I was conditioned genetically. I was obviously very blessed with whatever that freakish thing is that makes you be willing to get up early in the morning and work hard on stuff with internal motivation. I have no idea where that came from, but man am I glad I got those genes, whatever they were. But the second part of it was—yeah, it was the environmental conditioning around all the biographies, and all the reading and the learning, which laid a foundation of knowledge and belief systems that made it so that I could actually set these very large goals for myself and actually have somewhat of a realistic chance of hitting them.

Matt: I think it's interesting you mentioned that biologically, you're wired to jump out of bed in the morning and work on what you want to work on, but also, do you think that maybe could be a little bit the environment that your parents created for you? The fact that, since the age of 12, you've basically been told, “Go work on what you want to work on. Go learn and play.”?

Emerson: Oh, 100%. It's definitely that combination of nature and nurture.

Matt: That is such a good and interesting background. I had no idea that was the case for you. I know you eventually got on a pattern—or perhaps this is internet legend—but that you were reading one nonfiction book a day.

Emerson: That's correct.

Matt: How did you choose those books, and at what point during your career did you start picking up that habit?

Emerson: As part of my homeschool, most of what I learned, I learned through MuggleNet. The great thing about having a business is it kind of forces you to learn everything else out of necessity. I didn't know anything about accounting, but I certainly needed to learn something about accounting, because otherwise I wouldn't know where my money was, and how to get it, and so on. Kind of one skill set for the next. But I also did things like: I watched, like, a quarter of all the documentaries at my local library. And all these other random sources of information. I read a lot of fiction—tons of fiction—as a kid. Then, when I was in college...the quick pretext is that I decided that I wanted to change the world. I wanted to do it on a big scale and study these patterns. I got really interested in virality as a concept, because virality, to me, felt like a superpower, and if you could make things go viral, you could do anything, right? You could tip elections. You could overthrow dictators. You could start movements. You could revolutionize entire industries. I had this kind of burning obsession to understand why things go viral. Eventually, I decided to go to college for fun. Not a good reason. I got bored very quickly, very predictably. I was going to drop out and start another business, but before I did, I wanted to go really big with the next one. I wanted to identify a model that would maximize my probability of getting to a billion by the time I was thirty. Now, I knew the odds of that happening were infinitesimally small, but I figured, "Statistically speaking, I'll probably get three-ish swings at this, so how do I maximize the probability of one of those swings connecting?". I wanted to set off on this epic quest. I was like, "OK, before I start my next business, I want to be able to connect the [inaudible] patterns between all these different disciplines and industries. I want to learn everything." That was kind of the general goal.

Matt: Let me stop you right there, Emerson, because I want to get clarity on something. You kind of moved on from MuggleNet, and you start thinking about, "How can I do the next thing, but bigger?". When you say you wanted to get to a billion, are you talking about get to a billion dollars, a billion users, a billion downloads? What does that term "billion" mean to you?

Emerson: Yeah, it was a vague goal. It was like a billion dollars. But, you know, I haven't really ever cared about money for money's sake, but just as a tool for influence to create more impact.

Matt: As a metric for measurement, too. It's very smart to have measurable goals.

Emerson: Totally. [inaudible] I wanted to do big things, and that's one way of defining a "big thing."

Matt: Yup, absolutely.

Emerson: So, I set off on this quest. I set a goal of reading one nonfiction book every day until graduation. It was books about everything. Business, politics, psychology, economics, technology, science, with a very heavy overall concentration on studying the human mind. Neuroscience, cognitive psychology, behavioral science. Because I figured the human mind is constant in everything. If you understand people, and why people do what they do, then you understand half of everything else. But it wasn't just reading books. It was going through FC filings, 10-Ks, research, abstracts, textbooks. It was studying thousands of different companies, looking for patterns. Like, what do successful companies do differently than unsuccessful companies? It was studying industries: everything from natural gas wholesaling to drywall contracting. Again, looking for patterns. The patterns in industry structure is, like, so interesting and overwhelming. I get to where I can tell what industry—like, take this particular industry. Given these characteristics, it's almost certainly going to end up being an oligopoly. The market leader will have this much share. The second will have this much share. Margins will usually end up being about here. It just clarifies everything that happens in business, down to its base patterns. But anyway, it was actually a three-part process. It was reading, reviewing and rehearsing. I figured it as a waste of time to learn stuff if you couldn't remember the stuff and apply the stuff in a relevant situation. To maximize my retention, I spent the first six months doing a deep dive into the neuroscience of learning and memory. I believe learning how to learn is literally the most important skill that you could possibly develop. It provides an exponential return on the time you invest in it. It's like wishing for more wishes. I ended up building out different spaced repetition schedules where I would review everything that I wanted to remember on a schedule of a day later, a week later, a month later, and then every six months in perpetuity. The third part of the process was rehearsal. How you practice applying this information in relevant situations. It's not as simple as, if you're Kobe, just go to the gym and shoot 800 jumpers a day. I organize all the information into frameworks to contextualize it. I'd have a persuasion framework, a negotiation framework, an innovation framework, etc. So, for example, with negotiation: we had practice negotiations. I'd go through, like, a dozen books, take the fifteen best ideas—like tactics, techniques, strategies, devices—put them into mnemonic devices like acronyms so I could remember them in actual negotiations, and then I would get vicarious experience. I would replay past negotiations in my head using the strategies. I played fictional negotiations out in my head using the strategies. So, for example, I'd be watching an episode of *The West Wing*, I would see two Heads of State negotiating, and I would hit pause, and I would just replay the negotiation in my head from both their perspectives, applying each of those different strategies in turn. Again, all of this is designed to maximize the probability that when I'm in an actual negotiation, I actually think to apply those tactics. I believe that the time that I've spent studying and practicing negotiation, which has probably been—and when I say practicing, I mean this kind of practice—I've probably invested maybe 150 hours in it, and I do believe it's been worth eight figures to me. If you take the hourly rate on that, the ROI is just crazy, crazy, crazy high. I believe that's true for most people, too. One of the highest ROI things you could possibly do is to study negotiation. But the really big breakthrough for me came when I was studying innovation. The patterns of innovation are super interesting. People think of it like this bolt from the blue, you know, lightning strike that hits you, and that's what it feels like, but that's not how it actually really works. The way that I practiced innovating was I—again,

same thing. Went through a bunch of books, organized all the different types of business models into mnemonic devices—acronyms—and then I would go to Walmart. I would go from product, to product, to product on the shelves, and take every product, and just practice applying different business models to that product. So, for example, right now I'm sitting in front of a whiteboard. So, I take some dry erase markers and just go like: luxury, long tail, unused capacity, etc. Like, luxury: could I just sell a way more expensive dry erase marker to people with enough disposable income. Etc, etc. I was just practicing applying all these different ideas, and that's what led to a series of breakthrough moments, which led to the creation of the company.

Matt: Now, were these all...when you're rehearsing this...it's fascinating, because this is exactly what it takes to actually learn something and integrate it into your being and the way you operate. Is it something that you were doing naturally and in an impromptu way, or were you literally scheduling time? You know, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I'm going to go to Walmart and do my ideation game, and Tuesday and Thursday, I'm going to run through scenarios and watch *The West Wing* and other scenarios where there's negotiations. Or was it just sort of like, "I'm going to kind of live my life, and the way I'm going to choose to live my life is when I see an opportunity to apply a framework that I've studied and recorded, I'm going to apply that in that scenario."? Or some mix of both?

Emerson: What usually happens for me is I get really motivated—like with these innovation patterns like Walmart—I get really motivated for a period of time. It could be, like, hours, days, weeks or months. And I'll do it all the time. Sometimes I'll schedule it, sometimes I'll do it unscheduled. Then I'll just lose interest and not do it again. Or only do it when it's relevant and practical.

Matt: So really, you're taking advantage of the fact that you're extremely interested and intrigued in something, and during that time, you're doubling, tripling, quadrupling down on that specific skill and just sort of obsessing over it until it becomes boring to you, and you move onto the next thing.

Emerson: Exactly. And then, if it's something I consider to be a valuable skill for the future, I'll still—that framework...like the negotiation framework. The way that I use that now is that whenever I have—most of it's intuitive now and I don't even think about it. It just happens because I've had so much practice. But in the early days, when I was still kind of like an awkward teenager and didn't really know how to handle these negotiations with real adults and stuff, I would just pull out my framework, and I would try to negotiate not over the phone or in person. I would try to negotiate over email so I could actually take my time and think through the implications of it, and apply each of these strategies. Now I can actually just do it on the fly.

Matt: That's interesting, because I imagine your age, especially in the early days—because this is going to be before there were a lot of young CEOs and it was just kind of well known that you don't actually have to be 30, 40 years old to start a company, and that sometimes age can be a

benefit to starting a technology-driven business. We all know some of the classic negotiation techniques, but are there specific ones that played well for you? Are there tactics or strategies that helped compensate for being a little bit younger in those scenarios?

Emerson: Yeah. In the early days, people guessed how old I was because they could hear my voice, but I kept it a fiercely-guarded secret in the earliest days for that very same reason. From a negotiation perspective, basically, there's two strategies that I consider to be, by far, the two most important strategies in negotiation. The first one is: always ask for more than you expect to get. Most people are terrible negotiators because they are just too afraid of what will happen if they ask for more, so they don't even try. Over the course of their life, most people, I would argue from an earnings potential perspective—most white collar workers, anyway, who actually have some flexibility in this regard—they leave on the table hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars because they were just too afraid to even ask. So, that's one. The second one is that you have to make sure that you always project walk-away power. The second the other person knows that you can't walk away, you're done. You're completely done from a negotiation perspective. You have to make sure that even if you can't walk away, they don't know that.

Matt: [laughing] Those are both really good pieces of advice. Do you have any advice on getting the courage to ask for a bigger number than you think is reasonable or that you actually need at that moment?

Emerson: Yes I do! As you can probably guess, I love to find shortcuts so that you can condense a tremendous amount of learning into the shortest period of time possible. I think the fastest way to develop this kind of courage is through a series of exercises called "comfort zone challenges." An example of a comfort zone challenge is one called the Coffee Shop Challenge. The Coffee Shop Challenge is an idea that I got from a friend of mine, Noah Kagan. What he would do is he would go into coffee shops and ask for a 10% discount every time that he would order coffee. The reason why he would do that is because it is uncomfortable. That it is. There's no other reason why. It's just uncomfortable. So, if you do things like that that are deliberately uncomfortable, you change your identity, and that's what matters. Instead of like, "Ooh, something's uncomfortable, I should avoid it," you start to think, "Ooh, something's uncomfortable, I should seek it out." Then, when you get stuck in other situations later than are uncomfortable, you're like, "Ugh, this is back because it's uncomfortable," but instead, you reframe it as like, "Oh, this is good that it's uncomfortable," and you just get tougher, faster. Other examples. My 16-year-old brother comes and visits me in Chicago. We're walking around city streets, and he's a 16-year-old, so obviously, he's a total wuss, and he's afraid of everything. So, what I'd do is I'd give him challenges, like, "OK, Drew, I want you to stop the next person on the street, and I want you to ask them if they've seen the Muffin Man." Just really uncomfortable things like that, right? And then we'd scale it up until he's screaming at the top of his lungs really horrific and embarrassing things that I won't share here. Another example. I mentioned this a few times at a couple talks that I've given, and the way to illustrate it in the talks is to actually lay down onstage for 30 seconds. In the middle of my keynote, I'll just lay down onstage for 30 seconds because it's uncomfortable. It's great.

Matt: I love that. I think that's great. One of my favorite exercises—it's a little bit more of a failure exercise, but it's in the same vein. It's by a friend of mine, Julien Smith. He wrote the book, *The Flinch*.

Emerson: Yeah, I actually know Julien. He's great.

Matt: Yeah, he's an amazing guy, and what he's doing with Breather right now is pretty incredible. His book, *The Flinch*, I think that he wrote with Seth Godin, one of the exercises is to—when you pour your hot cup of coffee in the morning, and you've got it, and you're going to take that first sip, instead, take it, hold it with an outstretched arm, and let it fall onto the ground. Now, obviously, this should probably be in your kitchen, not in a restaurant or coffee shop. The idea being: obviously that's uncomfortable, but you're going to clean it up. Two, three minutes, you're going to have everything cleaned up. You can pour yourself another cup of coffee. You're going to realize that taking that step of just getting a little bit uncomfortable, and not fearing the failure of having to clean it up, is going to show you, one, that you can be in an uncomfortable situation and get through it, but two, the repercussions of something failing are not that high. You're just going to have your coffee five, ten minutes later.

Emerson: I love it.

Matt: Me, too. I did that once, and I promised my girlfriend I wouldn't do it again.

Emerson: [laughing] Yeah, the key is to find the comfort zone challenges that don't inconvenience the other people around you too much.

Matt: [laughing] Exactly. I like the lying down on stage one, though. That's a good idea. I might have to try that out at the next talk.

Emerson: It creates quite the impression.

Matt: And I think it kind of plays into your own persona and personal brand, not that you're even doing that intentionally. But that is that you kind of create your own path. You're not afraid to create your own schooling system. You're not afraid to create your own algorithm for taking content viral. You're not afraid to take the risk of laying down on stage, because you know what? This is Emerson. He just does things differently.

Emerson: [laughing] That's right. My first dream profession was to become a lawyer, because one of my parents' friends when I was a little kid was like, "You're so good at arguing. You'd make a great lawyer." She was totally not complimenting me at all. She was frustrated because I was arguing with her on things that kids start arguing about. I was like, "Oh, I guess I'm going to become a lawyer."

Matt: I'm glad that you decided to do what you ended up doing, because I'm very fascinated with Dose. I know some of the early days of that started with, obviously, MuggleNet and then OMG Facts, which is a social brand online that shares very interesting facts from all over the world. Could you talk a little bit about what you're doing with Dose now and why this is the thing that you've decided to grow to the number of employees that you have right now, and the reach that you have, with 200 billion views per month? I'm sorry, I said "billion." I meant "million," which is still an impressive number.

Emerson: [laughing] Only about a thousand times less impressive than billions, but I agree, we've done OK there.

Matt: You're on your way.

Emerson: Yeah. So, it's something I've been fascinated with my whole life. I went through phases early on where I was like, "No, I'm going to go start a hedge fund." Then I spent, like, 18 months studying patterns and building trading models, and I was like, "You know, this is not nearly as much fun, and doesn't create nearly as much impact, so I'm not going to do that. I'm going back into media." For the longest time, I basically wanted to build a virality machine. I wanted to build a system that would be able to create virality systematically. That's been kind of my lifelong product ambition. Really, the growth of Dose has just been a function of us getting closer to that elusive goal of creating that virality machine. I think back on things I used to think about virality even a year ago or two years ago, and I'm like, "Man, I didn't know anything back then." But even what I did know still put me as one of the most knowledgeable people in the world on that topic. So, the more resources that we get, the more things that we can test, and it's just fun. And it's interesting. And we're learning so much. And the industry is changing so quickly. Dose is the current manifestation of that. At the end of the day, what does that mean? What does a virality machine mean? Well, it just means a process. It means that there's a process of creating content that resonates. When we say "virality," that's all we mean. We mean content that resonates and that makes people want to share it with other people. That's fundamentally what we do every single day. We just try to get better, and better, and better at the art and science of creating that deeply resonant content that introduces those fresh ideas and perspectives for our audience.

Matt: Can you talk to me about the science of it? Because I would imagine, given what I know about you now, and you way you devour knowledge and then go about researching and applying, I imagine you have some frameworks. What is sort of the science behind the virality?

Emerson: There's a bunch of things people think about virality that aren't very useful or helpful, but are, like, common wisdom. Like what emotions tend to work better, and things like that. For the record, because most people are interested in that: positive emotions tend to work better than negative emotions. People basically share for one of two reasons: either we share because the content triggered "all of the feels," and we have to share those "feels" with other people—that's where positive content tends to work better—or we share because we want to

look cool. This is, of course, the reason why nobody shares porn. That's the highest level. Cute animals, humor, nostalgia. These are just functions of—we want to project a certain image of ourselves out to the world. Positive content projects a better image of ourselves out to the world versus being cynical and bitter. Nobody really wants to be friends with people who are cynical and bitter, so that's why we're more prone to sharing that kind of positive content. OK, back to the science. At the end of the day, what virality is about that most people don't understand is it's about how fast—just like a startup. A startup's like, you come up with this idea, and you iterate quickly to try to get to product-market fit, and once you get to product-market fit, you scale. Virality is very much the same way. You try a bunch of stuff...we call them "at-bats." The more at-bats that you get, the more likely you are to hit home run. But it's not just about getting at-bats, because if you're a terrible hitter, if you're blind and facing the wrong way, then it doesn't matter. You're never going to hit a homerun. But if your batting average is high and you get enough at-bats, you maximize the probability of hitting a homerun. We just focus on that formula. How do we get more at-bats, and/or how do we increase our batting average? Well, we increase our batting average through data. We spend a considerable amount of time focused on improving our apparatus and machinery for: how do we test more rapidly, and how do we test with higher degrees of confidence?

Matt: And what tools are you using for that right now? If there were, like, two or three tools that are the most important for what you do, what would those be?

Emerson: Internal tools and Facebook.

Matt: Nice. Good answer.

Emerson: Facebook is amazing. Facebook is, like, the greatest tool ever created at testing virality.

Matt: It is the holy grail, and I'm just now getting into testing more with Facebook, so I'm definitely eager to get more of your perspective on the science of that.

Emerson: Yeah, it's amazing. Facebook was my first petri dish years ago. What happened was I kind of stumbled across—when I was studying innovation theories—certain patterns that I thought might be exploitable with online content, which sounds bad, but it's not actually bad. It's just, like, things that work with virality. I developed a series of simple algorithms to tend to get Facebook pages to go viral and created dozens of pages that went from zero to millions of fans over a period of a few hours to a few days. Basically, what I was doing is I was testing hundreds of different variables and seeing which variables correlated positively with virality. Then I just kept shortening the viral loop until I could tell within 20 seconds if a page was going to go viral. Then I was able to take the same ideas from Facebook to Twitter. I got millions of followers on Twitter. YouTube, Tumblr, websites, apps—the same general strategies worked on every major platform. Obviously, they all had different peculiarities. That was kind of like the early days of the company, too. We started making websites. We ended up building over 30 different

websites that generated—each of them independently—in the millions of monthly unique visitors. Because, again, it's just the same patterns. It's batting average. That's, like, the very quick high-level on how I think about it that's different from how other people think about it. It's how you test the content, how you curate the content. Most people think of virality as, like, something that just comes from scratch, but it rarely ever comes from scratch. Almost everything that you see that's viral has already been on the internet before. The same things go viral over, and over, and over again.

Matt: I know I could talk to you about this topic all day, Emerson, but if people wanted to learn more about virality, what resources—whether your own or books that other people have written—would you recommend that people go and check out?

Emerson: There's not a lot of great content out there on this topic, unfortunately. Although, we are actually in the process of creating more content around this, so stay tuned for that. We actually have a book that's going to be coming out probably early next year, very much on this topic. Like, applied virality. How to actually use these strategies to make things viral, instead of just, "Here's some studies on virality," which isn't all that helpful. It is interesting, but not all that helpful.

Matt: Sure. Well, I'll definitely look forward to that. If people want to follow you and what you're doing, where can they find you?

Emerson: The company, you can find us at Dose.com, or for my contact information, etc etc, you can go to EmersonSpartz.com.

Matt: Awesome. I did check out your website earlier, and one of the things I found really interesting is that you and your wife launched something called GivesMeHope, which is sort of like a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* riff for the Millennials. Can you talk a little bit about that project and why that has gotten your passion before we sign off here?

Emerson: Yeah. My wife and my cofounder, Gaby, is actually also a 12-year-old entrepreneur. It's crazy. Also, she's super cute, so I totally hit the jackpot there.

Matt: Did you guys find each other at 12?

Emerson: [laughing] No, we didn't. We met at college, actually, of all the places. What happened was...at this point, we had been making all these Facebook pages and had this big social audience. We're like, "OK, well, we're both pathological optimists, and we want to create positive impact in the world, so how can we apply what we've learned about virality to positive content?". This was around the same time that that website FMyLife went viral, and we're like, "Hey, what if we did the opposite of that? What if we did positive stories instead of cynical and negative stories?". That was kind of the inspiration for the site. I'm so proud of that site, because the site ended up spinning out—the site did so well that we ended up getting, like, thousands of

letters from people saying that the stories on that website kept them from dropping out of school, saved their marriage, brought them back from the verge of suicide. I mean, it was getting recommended at suicide hotline prevention centers to give people hope. We ended up spinning out an entire network of sites similar to it: positive content sites that collectively—including a site for people sharing secrets—they got quite popular, and those sites generated about a half billion page views, which I'm just so proud of.

Matt: That's incredible. Well, congratulations on the progress with that. I love the focus on positive energy. It's clearly been a pattern throughout your life: following the positive emotions of intrigue, interest and energy, to obsess on things and then go from one thing to the next. It's clear that that's sort of your personal energy, and that comes through in your companies. I want to say thanks for taking the time to talk to us a little bit. Maybe we'll have to do a follow-up at some point in time to deep-dive on virality. Maybe sometime when your book is about to come out.

Emerson: Sounds great. Love that.

Matt: Love it, Emerson. Well, thank you so much for taking the time. Before we sign off, I just wanted to give a quick shout-out to the Chicago tech community up there, which I know you're a big part of. Could you maybe give us a 30-second pitch on why Chicago is the place you decided to call home?

Emerson: [laughing] So, I'm from the Midwest. Chicago just has this magnetic pull for everyone in the Midwest. I have a bunch of family here. But, Chicago's great. The cost of living is half as much as, like, SF or New York, and from an engineering perspective—although it's competitive for engineers—you don't have to go be with Google and Facebook, which is great from a “cost of doing business” perspective.

Matt: Absolutely, man. Well, I know you've built a great team there, and you've probably gotta get back to work and jump in there with the team you're building at Dose. Thanks again, and we'll be in touch soon.

Emerson: Alright. Thanks, man.

Matt: Thank you.