

COVID-19: Interview with Samanah Duran, Founder of BEYOUROWN

BEYOUROWN is a digital media and news company dedicated to inspiring women in business. Maddyness spoke with Samanah Duran, Founder of BEYOUROWN to understand how the company is coping during the COVID-19 pandemic and what the future holds.

The overall vision of BEYOUROWN is to help other entrepreneurs flourish and grow their own business by helping them access the right tools and provide the relevant resources that are often hard to find. It aims to champion and connect women from all industries to come together and support each other in the development of their plan or their initiative.

We already know that women in leadership roles are both knowledgeable and experienced enough to talk about business subject matters and can drive an honest conversation amongst that proves unparalleled engagement. We all know that there isn't only one correct path in business, BEYOUROWN offers different methods of approach.

How are you using your platform to

inspire the next generation of female leaders?

As a valid source of inspiration, BEYOUROWN is a space to support female leaders, entrepreneurs and pioneers to talk about their own personal experiences, challenges and victories. Just by steering the conversation towards this, we aim to ensure the next generation of female leaders can benefit from that by learning to successfully navigate their own way through their business journey whilst being the most authentic version of themselves and standing by their own personal ethos.

Why do you think supporting other women in business is paramount?

I think supporting other women in business is paramount as when I started my own business journey a lot of the mistakes I made could have been avoided had I surrounded myself around champions within my industry and being involved with a support network of other like-minded ambitious women in business.

Never the less, the leadership style I have acquired over the years as an entrepreneur is derivative from the mistakes I made previously, that even goes as far as to say I've had to make money that I've then lost to be able to get to the point I am now – not intentionally may I add! My thesis is, those other women shouldn't need to go through that, and that's why I am so passionate about sharing not only my own business journey on BEYOUROWN but also other women's business journeys as well.

Women supporting women is exactly what this is about, people need to have a better understanding of the challenges that women specifically face which are mostly unique to them. Women are brilliant at helping other women to see an opportunity within a challenge in unimaginable ways, we need to continue pushing for that because there is true power in a pack of women.

Why is it important to use your own personal voice and platform to help other female entrepreneurs?

I believe we have a core responsibility to provide knowledge to others to move a collective consciousness forward. Anybody who has a relatively high profile or

a strong online presence that can get their community to listen should be using their voice for the greater good.

What I've learned over the years of entrepreneurship I put it out to my community which I would like to hope assist's them in their professional development. Even if they only take away one key learning and apply it to what they are doing, I am happy with that.

Tell us your journey up to COVID-19

We were in the middle of tent-pegging a pop-up concession that would cement the brand's offline footsteps. Although we are delivering more and more content to the human communication channels available to our online audiences, we are interested in exploring avenues that have more of a physical space where women can get together in a more social environment through workshops, live panel discussions and exhibitions held by us.

And a lot of these plans have had to be put on hold until further notice, this includes the physical publication of the BEYOUROWN bi-annual magazine launching Q2/Q3. Still, it's given me the perfect opportunity to pivot a little, re-strategise, re-align and think about the BEYOUROWN brand we really want to create as a continuation of what we have already built.

What were the biggest professional challenges during lockdown?

Well, the weather has been brilliant as a starting point, metaphorically speaking I know that by actually being in an isolated situation meant I could focus on my own voice as the founder behind BEYOUROWN which led to creating the BEYOUROWN Podcast and BEYOUROWN TV.

It meant that the conversations I would normally have over a coffee with someone or a dinner or an event with other fantastic businesswomen were getting recorded and shared to my wider network. To me, this is another communication method we as a brand-have perfectly executed. We also proudly worked with almost 300 UK PR agencies to bring more advice and evidence-backed articles produced by British women in business.

In addition to that, we've also successfully partnered with 12 industry leaders to offer a series of insightful webinars covering a multitude of business topics from HR to Finance to PR to Marketing over on BEYOUROWN TV.

The power of taking that time to reflect around not only what these women felt during lockdown was important to get out into the world, that also gave me the opportunity to reflect and learn from.

I'm so grateful that the lockdown challenge of being isolated and quarantined in all my own manner I managed to ask the right questions by being able to reflect on how I got here and understanding that every person has their own individual journey and they have their own individual lessons that they can share, provides a fresh consideration for what other people might need to know the different stages of their business journey.

Some of the professional challenges have been trying to grow a team during the lockdown. Recruiting new team members without ever meeting them can be quite scary because it's almost impossible to sense someone's energy over a screen monitor. I had to trust my intuition in a different way when attracting new talent and remote hiring.

What were the biggest personal challenges during lockdown?

I am hugely optimistic though a small challenge I've faced during lockdown is maintaining my positive glowing mindset because entrepreneurship can be very difficult with plenty of dull.

Luckily I've always enjoyed a routine, so by still following my daily routine, it allowed me to get through my incredibly challenging to-do list each day irrespective of lockdown. Typical things like taking my dog out, eating well as well as keeping healthy and active despite the late-night working hours that often leaked over into early mornings.

I've got so much respect for women who are potentially in a much worse situation than myself, I am lucky to have my family close and have BEYOUROWN still thrive throughout the pandemic. Another reason why I had to ensure BEYOUROWN had some additional support mechanisms in place for women.

Was remote working a new thing for you

and if so will you be adapting your work to allow more of it?

A laptop lifestyle for me isn't anything new as I only really need my laptop, phone and diary, although we do have an HQ I work from time to time.

We are digital-first, but our BEYOUROWN Membership Club is really based on bringing a female network together whilst in the presence of each other at an event we host. With the use of today's technology and apps, a result of adapting to a remote membership club event taken place online meant that we expanded the BEYOUROWN network into other markets which I hadn't considered before namely North America and areas in the Middle East.

We will now be implementing this on a permanent basis so that non-UK based members of our club can still be part of the community without having to travel far and wide which can become unfeasible in the long term.

How have you been keeping your team happy?

BEYOUROWN company culture really aims to keep an upbeat positive attitude with every aspect starting from the brand core. Spending time understanding my team sincerely so that they in trusting me, means we can build a healthy long-term business relationship.

I believe that if they commit to working and building BEYOUROWN, then I also have a duty of commitment to ensure that their welfare and mental-wellbeing is equally taken care of. I like to offer incentives, commission and motivation because I am a results-driven founder, so great results deserve rewards.

As a leader, have you successfully managed you (and your teams) mental resilience through lockdown?

I absolutely do not overwhelm them or push them too much, by allowing them more time and by constantly re-iterating that everyone is part of a supportive community. Helping my team create a workload that they can conceivably do whilst looking after their mental well-being requires me to make myself available to them for a call at the start of the day end of the day in the middle of the night. This pandemic has been tough for everyone and the last thing I

want to do to my team is to exhaust them and break them down.

Have you made any changes to your business and business model?

A business model that doesn't change isn't a very good model! We must always adapt, innovate and pivot to stay ahead of the movement as an entrepreneur. Considering that we started out as a non-profit back in 2016 to a now profitable venture, I would say that year on year its been impossible for me to a standstill due to scale and growth, if anything we've just had to pull things forward earlier due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I understand that many companies that had digital strategies that were years in length- have now suddenly diminished to weeks in length. The amount of change that has happened in such a short period of time is really astonishing.

I've definitely compressed my digital strategy into months rather than years and much of the content created content with our collaboration partners and our team of writers has had multiple revisions to make sure it will be relevant and up-to-date post-COVID-19.

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

We've always been great at helping to pioneer change within female entrepreneurship as the media hub of inspiration, tools and resources that we are, but more recently we've managed to keep our concepts much more light/upbeat due to the global feeling of lockdown negativity.

I am confident in what we are doing and have been quick to lob off any ideas that don't work. It's never ideal to waste time on any dead layers, and we simply don't have that luxury being a small team that we are.

The urgency to get things moving in, to get things moving forward in a positive way has never been so acute. This absolutely gives us more confidence as a brand to say no to things that do not fit the ethos and still make those spontaneous decisions.

How is your relationship with your

investors?

Having had a VC financially invest in my first retail startup, and using that overall experience to be able to learn and grow from, I made the conscious decision to launch BEYOUROWN as a separate entity that I currently own completely.

That isn't to say we haven't had keen interest from investment companies, but it's a genuine discussion I believe happens when you are very sure of that particular avenue you want to take.

Are there any changes in society/economy that you think will help you?

It's only just a little over 100 years since women have been allowed to vote and we know the fight for somewhat 'equality' isn't over yet. I would certainly say the change to how women see themselves in society and what they're willing to put up with has definitely had a massive positive impact on BEYOUROWN.

For too many years it's been totally okay to accept abhorrent behaviour in certain industries, the expectation of what women we're going to accomplish is very different to what it is now. Entrepreneurship has long been seen as a male-dominated arena, but now we've witnessed a huge shift in the understanding that women are as relevant in the boardroom as they are in any other room they can be in.

Tell us about your future post-COVID?

The future post COVID will see us expand the BEYOUROWN Female Business Directory that is currently combined under the same hub of BEYOUROWN by working with new female entrepreneurs who own a business of valuable asset to the community.

The future will also see us re-invest in the next generation of leaders and female-led businesses. We need to continue making sure that our brand message is heard far and wide whilst we aim to deliver what is expected of us. We need to keep driving the right conversations forward, keep challenging the status quo and keep thinking outside of the box.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

I think it's incredibly important that you surround yourself with the people you admire for whatever reason professionally. If there is a particular founder or leader you aspire to be like then head down to one of their workshops, seminars or networking events.

Staying educated and honing in on your craft so you are as great as you possibly can be is super important. That is what is going to separate you from other founders and take you from being "good" to "great."

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