

Welcome to the Event Tech Podcast, where we explore the ever evolving world of event technology every week. This show is brought to you by Endless Events, the event AV company that doesn't suck. Now let's talk tech.

Brandt Krueger:

Hello everybody and welcome to another edition of the Event Tech Podcast. I'm Brandt Krueger of Event Technology Consulting. Will Curran is onsite with an event this week, but just to keep things going, I fired up the random adjective generators. So Will is the certain Will Curran onsite. I am the boring Brandt Krueger here in my new podcast studio in Minneapolis, Minnesota as we're starting to get things settled in. But I am being joined today by Ashlee Ammons who is the co-founder of Mixtroz. Not mixed draws, ladies and gentlemen, Mixtroz. So we are going to be talking today about her technology, her kind of bend and her story much like we did with the folks that we had the guys on that did Crowd Mics. So we kind of wanted to get things from the beginning because Ashlee has had kind of an interesting experience as she's gone from, as many of us do, from just being an outside person, attending conferences and things like that to suddenly finding themselves in the event business. So Ashlee, thank you so much for joining us today.

Ashlee Ammons:

Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

Brandt Krueger:

All right. I did kind of skip over your bio, but to be fair, all it says is serial achiever with big goals. So I think that's a great bio though. I like it short, sweet to the point.

Ashlee Ammons:

It's to the point. I think everybody knows that person, like in their own circle. So just think of me as that person.

Brandt Krueger:

Well, why don't you tell us a little bit about the origin story of Mixtroz and how it came to be. Then we'll talk a little bit about actually how you made it happen, how you actually went from taking that step of that idea to making it go.

Ashlee Ammons:

Okay, perfect. Sounds great. So, hello everybody out there. I think it's good to give you guys a little bit of context on who I was before we started this company. So since my bio was so short and sweet, I do actually come from an events background. So all the way back to undergrad when I was in a sorority I was definitely the social chair. So that was me kind of dabbling in events at a very young age. I went to college in Cleveland, Ohio. While I was there, I secured an internship with LeBron James. I was working directly for him for like two and a half years. That was also another dabbling in events. After I got through kind of simpler tasks, like answering fan mail, as I grew in that position, they let me work on his marketing summit. So we had some of

the biggest brands in the worlds from Coca-Cola to Nike bringing their seniorest marketing executives to Akron, Ohio to meet with LeBron.

Ashlee Ammons:

I was on the planning team for that at maybe age 19. So very early on, I got events, I saw it, I feel like that high that we all get when an event is being activated as per the plan with minimal hiccups we'll say. So I've just loved events for a long time. After undergrad, I did move to New York city. I started as somebody who's executive assistant and I worked my way up to become director of events over a very large hospitality group in New York city. So to date I've activated events for everybody from Oprah to Leonardo DiCaprio and big brands like Coca-Cola to Moet Hennessy. So that's kind of my events background just to put it in a little nutshell. So fast forward to Mixtroz, I'm going to describe a scenario that I know every single person listening to this podcast has experienced.

Ashlee Ammons:

I was at a conference and I was very excited to be there because I wanted to connect with new people. When it became time to network, the event organizers suggested going up to someone with the same colored dot on their name tag as me. Now a few things. This was an all women's conference and women put their name tag on their breast area without fail. This dot that was on the name tag was super tiny. It was like the point of a Sharpie. So me trying to go up to someone and say, "Okay, I'm blue, you're blue," with no additional context is very awkward. It's specifically very awkward in the digital age that we're in.

Ashlee Ammons:

So I did what many people would do I feel, I ended up going to lunch by myself and I played on my smartphone and I caught up on the news, but I left that conference with not really making any new connections. The evening of that conference I was speaking to my mom about that experience. She scolded me because she was an HR executive at the time. So waste of time, waste of money, yada, yada. And literally over the course of one night, which was November the 9th of 2014, my mom and I came up with a very primitive version of Mixtroz, I would say.

Brandt Krueger:

So I have to apologize because the way that I kind of introed you, I implied that you weren't in the event industry before. What I was trying to say and I did very badly, was that you worked your way into the event tech industry from doing so. So I apologize for that. You've actually been in this industry for quite some time and so it wasn't that fully outside experience as an attendee. So I apologize for that. So you got ahold of your mom and you're talking about it. What then is the, "Okay, no, seriously, let's make this a thing?" How does that process go?

Ashlee Ammons:

Honestly, we talk about this, like this comes up quite often and I don't know that besides the fact that we really believe in the product that we've created, like we really had no reason to go forward with this. Like my mom and I, we were both very comfortable in our careers. We were

both of us high achievers, doing very well. Entrepreneurship isn't in our... it's not in a near generation of our family. Most everyone in our family, they went to school, got a job, work themselves up in that job and that's kind of been the trajectory. So it's not even like we have a family member that owns a restaurant, for example, who we could say, "What is this journey like?" Then to compound this even further, "Oh, let's add tech to this." My mom and I don't code. We don't have formal technology training, but what we do have is a whole heap of hustle and street smarts. So my mom was actually on a sabbatical from her last HR role.

Ashlee Ammons:

She was a global HR executive for a company that was located in Nashville, Tennessee, the company IPO. So she was taking a little breather. So without my mom being on that sabbatical and being full time on Mixtroz from the jump, I don't know that the business would have went forward. People often say to me like, "Oh my gosh, it's really cute that you started a business with your mom." And I was like, "Well, that's not really how it rolled. It's more like without my mom, there is no business." Because at the time, frankly I was still living and working full time in New York in events, which we know it's hectic, it's busy, it's intense. So without my mom to really push the business forward in the beginning, I don't know that we'd be where we are today.

Brandt Krueger:

So more than just an angel investor with a vested interest in making sure that you succeed, but actually a true partner in the development.

Ashlee Ammons:

Absolutely. Because it's unique like specifically in a tech business. Like of course family business is not a new thing, but like in tech it kind of is a new thing. But I think we're at the forefront of that because in fact there is a trend going where millennials specifically are partnering with their parents that are baby boomers or like on the cusp of being baby boomers and the partnerships are working. So my mom and I are a part of that trend, which I'm very grateful to be. I think that being able to come at a problem with different generational experience is powerful. It helps you not to miss things.

Brandt Krueger:

Well, and that's something we've talked about on kind of our sister podcast, Event Icons is this idea of mixing the generations, talking about diversity, not only of kind of the normal things. These are the things that people leap to mind, which is things, diversity of race, diversity of religion, diversity of background. But also diversity of age is one that is frequently kind of overlooked when you're trying to mix people together in a way that you're trying to get as many different opinions and views as possible.

Ashlee Ammons:

Yeah, I mean I would absolutely agree. I think I tell people all the time, people they asked me questions about being an entrepreneur and whatnot. Like what's your advice? I was like, "Well first of all, if you don't have a co-founder get one. Second of all, if you're looking for a co-founder

please do not look over... and I'm going to say very specifically women over 40 in your network." Because that particular class of person, they're dangerous because if you think about it, if it's a female executive who's over 40, however she got to where she is today, she had a fight to get there. Because this is all pre Me Too, pre Us Too, pre Them Too, all of that. However, that person got to the top, they had to fight to get there and a fighter is exactly who you want to be a co-founder

Brandt Krueger:

That is an amazing point and such a powerful... Words are hard as Lindsay always says. A powerful way of looking at it, that again stressing the importance of different kinds of diversity. Because that might not be the something, it'd be easy to just, "Okay, boomer," or whatever and to be able to move on.

Ashlee Ammons:

You referenced that, because like, I cringed so hard when that happens. I like when I saw the video and all of that, I was just like, "Ooh, not good. Not good, not good, not good."

Brandt Krueger:

Well, anytime you're writing off an entire generation or group of people, just because it's never a good idea, no matter which-

Ashlee Ammons:

It's not.

Brandt Krueger:

... direction you're going. Certainly as a Gen Xer myself, I certainly lived for... Well, to a certain extent, still I'm living through the stereotype of the Gen Xers are lazy and just to have no ambition and we don't ever do anything with our lives and that kind of thing. That also has been pushed downward towards the millennials and Gen Z to a certain extent as well. So I know we're getting a little far field, but I think it's worthy of just making those points and really when you are looking for co-founders and things like that being open to folks that have done the fight and fought the fought and have the experience. That yes, fresh ideas are important and amazing and incredible and necessary, but there is also something to be said for experience and having been in a battle or two on the way up.

Ashlee Ammons:

I was going to say and to finish that thought off so we can get back to the events side of things out. What I would say is, I mean there's so many articles as of late that say, "If you're a founder that's like 40, 50, you have a higher likelihood of success than a founder that's like 25, 30. That's because of life experience. You know how to navigate yourself through things and you don't give up as easily.

Brandt Krueger:

I'm not shocked by that statistic at all. I mean the other part of that same episode that we were talking about on Event Icons is the idea of the second life of that you've done your kind of primary career up until about 50. Then that's the time where people start to get a little itchy and you're like, "Okay, now what do I want to do when I grow up now that I'm 50." And start doing that second career of consulting and education and those types of things, giving back to a certain extent to the industries. But let's move back to Mixtroz. So you've gotten together with your mom. Your mom's pushing you forward saying, "Okay, let's do this thing." It feels a little weird to keep calling her your mom because... what was her name again?

Ashlee Ammons:

Her name is Kerry and it really freaks people out when... actually either one, like I'm kind of in between a rock and a hard place. When I don't call her mom, people freak out. When I call her Kerry people also freak out. But her name is Kerry Schrader and she is also my mom.

Brandt Krueger:

Fantastic. So fair to say, co-founder then?

Ashlee Ammons:

Indeed, yes.

Brandt Krueger:

All right. So let's talk about the journey now. So you've gotten the idea and so you've decided to push this thing forward. What were kind of the initial steps in, "Okay, we've got... this is weird with the dots and the name tags." What does those initial conversations look like as you're starting to figure out what that better thing might look like?

Ashlee Ammons:

Well, I think, at first, people really saw us as very like unlikely tech founders. But I would say part of what has made us successful in this journey is we really took our own experience. So I had my event production experience, so I'm looking at how humans move through a space and designing a space that is great for humans to move through. It's engaging and experiential and they have what they need at every part of the event journey. Then my mom is coming from the lens of, she is a human expert. She's an HR executive. She understands how humans need to function when they're at work. So we took those two expertise together, which is just basically human intelligence, human expertise. Not to mention my mom and I would say, we're just really great at networking. My mom and I are both natural connectors. I must get that from her.

Ashlee Ammons:

So we took all of that and before we thought about software, we thought about functionality first and then like how humans would actually use the product. It's been interesting because over the course of this journey, which started in 2014. I can't tell you how many founders I've run into, many of the men who said, "I had an idea like Mixtroz but it didn't work because it was too techie." Meaning instead of building a Kia, they built a Tesla when a Tesla wasn't really

necessary. We built Mixtroz to be like a utility tool that is easy. If you have a smart phone, you can use Mixtroz. Mixtroz is for everyone. So as we were building, we kept that front of mind and then we built a technology to support that and not the other way around. I think a lot of people build tech first, human second. I would argue that depending on the kind of software you're building, it certainly needs to be human first and then building tech to support what the humans need to do.

Brandt Krueger:

So let's start getting nitty gritty then a little bit. So you're thinking it through, you're approaching it from these two different angles. You've got planners side, you've got people's side. Coming from not being in tech, how do you first start to find coders, find people who are going to start putting this together? Like literally, what are the first steps as you start to say, "Okay, we really want to make this a thing, now how do we make it a thing?"

Ashlee Ammons:

Absolutely. And that's a great question. I would say people love to get granular here because oftentimes you'll hear people talk about a software and they just start at the good part. Like when they were raking in money instead of what they were doing at the very beginning. So the way we started is, we came up with this idea in November of 2014 there was kind of a month lag and then the holiday season was coming. So I was going to go home anyway from New York city to Nashville. So during that holiday break, I thought I was going to be at home to rest before I got geared up for like Sundance and Grammys and Oscars and all of that. But instead I had like a 10 day think tank with my mom who had been thinking and kind of pontificating on Mixtroz over the course of that month. So while we were home during that think tank and I mean all that think tank was, we went to the school of Google. Google will tell you everything you need to know. I was like that's like an unofficial ad right there.

Brandt Krueger:

Yeah. Basically, you can find anything.

Ashlee Ammons:

It is. For people who say, "I don't know how to do that." That shouldn't even be a phrase anymore in 2019 almost 2020. You could figure out almost everything if you're willing to do the work and look for it. So we started with what is an app? How do you get an app developed? Like all these great questions that we ask Google. It kind of told us what we need to know. But the biggest thing that happened is over that holiday break, I realized that the CES conference was coming up in Las Vegas, Consumer Electronics Show. I had had customers exhibit there before and build out kind of like experiential areas for customers there before. I was telling my mom about it and I was like, "Well, I clearly can't go this year so maybe we'll go next year." My mom said, "Well cool, you can't go, I'm going." And I was like...

Brandt Krueger:

Nice.

Ashlee Ammons:

I was just like, "Oh, okay." Here's the thing about my mom, because my mom is old school. So she went online and like went to get a ticket to CES and she saw how much the tickets were and she's like, "I'm not paying for this." However much it was, she was just like, "I'm not." So she actually found the email address for the CEO of a section of CES called App Nation, which focuses exclusively on apps. She emailed him and my dad and I were like laughing at her. We're like, "Okay, you're so lame. Why are you asking for a coupon from this person that we don't know?" It was so funny because within 24 hours, the man emailed her back and said, "Okay, I get it. You're great. You're new. Come on, free."

Brandt Krueger:

Nice. Not just discounted but free, come on in.

Ashlee Ammons:

But free and it's so funny what just happens if you ask someone the question. You know what I mean? Like what's the worst he would have said no, and then you figure it out. I mean, but you just ask the question and she got what she wanted. So she went on to App Nation by herself. So she attended CES. I told her, I said, "Obviously mom, you're going to feel a little fish out of water." Age group, I was thinking about her being a woman of color. I was thinking about, but indeed when she got to Vegas, I mean, she felt like a total fish out of water. She was like, "I was at this conference..." She was like, "I was one of maybe two women of color. Then of course the only one in my particular age group. Then I was surrounded by a sea of gentleman in hoodies and it was just like a lot." Because my mom is very out there. She came up there with her like snakeskin cowboy boots on, coming from Nashville, like she's so intense.

Ashlee Ammons:

What ended up happening is she went to a table, like a high boy table in a corner and there were two beers on that table. But she was like, "Who leaves open containers in 2015? Like no way." So she just kind of like posts up there by herself and she's really observing the flow of the room. She was thinking to herself, "Man, I wish Mixtroz existed today because I have that feeling. I have that so awkward feeling. I have no idea where to even start to make meaningful connections in this room." So then two older white gentleman walk over to her and they joined her at her little table. So they get to talk and after a while, so she says to them, "Why did you come over here?" And those two people were like, "Because these are our beers, you're at our table." Long story short, those people became our app developers and they've been with us since 2015.

Brandt Krueger:

Oh wow. That was not where I thought that story was going.

Ashlee Ammons:

I see, I was going to arrive at the point, I was totally arriving at the point. So that is a very serendipitous story. But I think when it goes to show is just the importance of connection and the importance of being able to speak to anyone agnostic of how different from you, you think they are, which obviously goes back to the total core/thesis of my business. It's that connectivity between people. So literally when you ask me the question, "How did we learn about tech?" I credit our dev team and in particular, Bill Rose, who is our interim CTO basically. It's so funny because me and Bill did not get along the first year that we were working together. We were having like a generational gap but as our relationship grew, we really have a ton of respect each other. I would say love for each other. Now I actually refer to him as uncle Bill more often than not. He taught us along the way.

Ashlee Ammons:

He is someone that we found. I think it's so crucial that if you are going to work with an outside team to develop your product, that team has to believe in your product. It can't just be for a check. You know what I mean? Like they need to believe in what you're doing. And because we felt that with Bill and his team, both here in the US and offshore, from the very beginning, they have literally taught us as we've gone along. And vice versa, we have taught them things as well. So it's kind of been an awesome partnership from then till now. They literally from when we signed with them, I think which was officially like February of 2015, they worked with us on branding. So our original Mixtroz logo, they came up with it. Going through the color theory, like picking colors for Mixtroz. Because I was such a maniac about our branding in the beginning, we've never had to go back and do a huge overhaul.

Ashlee Ammons:

It was important to really use my expertise in experiential marketing and build a brand that could sustain. There's a reason why Mixtroz is orange and blue. It's orange because Eventbrite is orange. And that signals to the brain like activity, live, in person, excitement, happiness, all of that. Then there's a reason that it's blue because the other side is the technology piece. All of your major tech brands from LinkedIn to Facebook are blue. So our logo is orange and blue for those reasons. So that they helped us lay the track there. They then built our first MVP. I think it's very interesting that the way that I communicated our app to our developers in the beginning was, I took a stack of post-it notes and I looked at apps on my phone and I just drew out the screens as I thought they would flow.

Ashlee Ammons:

Then I put that on the back of my bathroom door in order. I took a picture of it, sent it to our developers and that was good enough for them to build our first wire frame off of. What's so interesting about that is I now know that Google actually has a similar process when they're developing a new app. They get people together in a room and they do this thing called crazy eights and basically everyone draws the screens out on post-its. Then for them whatever they see duplicates of like people duplicate what they have written or what they've drawn, that's what they put into the first version of the app. I find that fascinating.



Brandt Krueger:

I'm curious, we're going down another well here and I promise there will still be plenty of time to get down to what Mixtroz actually does and how the product is today. But I'm curious to know how much of the rest of your kind of experiential background had those kind of real world applications to this process. Coming in as you did from events and having that mindset or maybe from the other direction, you talked about that your mom had that... was bringing that HR thing. What are the really practical things kind of came out of that experience? Like the color or along those lines or design. How much did that impact your design?

Ashlee Ammons:

Yeah, no, absolutely. Honestly, I would say that practical experience, like, I mean man, it has served us so well. So in addition to the branding and things like that, it's things like, I know how to manage agencies. So we work with a digital marketing agency. I think coming in dry with understanding how the nuances with really managing an agency. Like part of my experience, I worked for an agency and then I've also been on the client side of working with an agency so because of that, I feel like when... Our digital marketing agency that we have right now, I love them, but it was certainly a learning curve for them. Because they were more used to working with like, let me say like medical offices and lawyers and that kind of thing. So when I came to them as a client, I was, "guns blazing" and they weren't really ready for me. But now we have such a beautiful working relationship because as a person who worked at an agency, I know when they're trying to push me off or when I can really get stuff sooner.

Ashlee Ammons:

I just don't play games with them on that and they know that now we have a beautiful working relationship. I would say it's things like that. In addition to that Mixtroz has garnered awesome PR. If you look on our website and look at our press page, we've been in Forbes, Bloomberg, Business Insider. We've been all over the place. So because of my background, I have a degree in public relations, but also just in my years of experience in New York and whatever, I know how to tell a story. I knew that our story was unique and I knew that we could use that story to grow and we've certainly done that. I mean, in fact we speak pretty regularly now and speaking, well might look like, "Oh, like they're on the road speaking." No, no, no, trust and believe, speaking is a t-top of funnel activity for me at Mixtroz. Because if I speak and I run a mix, then people are like, "Oh my goodness, I need this at my office or I need this at my group or whatever."

Ashlee Ammons:

So that is like a sales tool for us. I mean, frankly, it's kind of amazing to be able to get paid to do something I love any way that drums up more business for my business. How cool is that? Then I would definitely say on my mom's side, my mom something that she was like totally nutty about in the beginning was she was like from day one in Mixtroz, we had a bookkeeper. Like literally, like we came up with the idea and then like day two was like, "Oh, we got a bookkeeper." The reason for that was my mom's corporate experience when she worked for the HR company, they were purchased by an equity group. So she was used to working with Apollo

and having to understand like how you have to report back to investors and how those numbers need to be presented and all of that.

Ashlee Ammons:

She wanted to ensure that every cent that's been spent by Mixtroz, for Mixtroz is accounted for. That occludes the money that we put into the business ourselves, the money that we raise for our friends and family and then the money that we raised from outside investors and so on.

Brandt Krueger:

So there's one more part of the backstory that I want to touch on. That is the fact that at some point you pulled up roots and decided to move, both you and your mom. Right?

Ashlee Ammons:

Indeed, yes.

Brandt Krueger:

Give us a little bit of the background on that and how that came to be, the hows and whys, because it wasn't just because you weren't digging the music in Nashville or what was going on in New York.

Ashlee Ammons:

Absolutely. I mean, so let's say this. So the reason that I moved from New York to Nashville was one, my parents' property was in Nashville, to be honest. It just made a lot of sense for me to... My overhead obviously, in New York even as a single woman, it was high. So to be able to reduce overhead, get rid of the apartment, all of that and really move back into my family home, which was a sacrifice frankly on my end because I was already living my dream. New York was my dream. I was doing great in New York, so I was already living my dream. So it was kind of, I don't know. It was kind of intense for me to move back home after all that time. At that point I think I was 28 years old and I hadn't lived at home since I was 17 when I went off to college. So that was definitely unique and a learning curve. But the thing that I'll say that really got me to convert to either I need to be a full time founder or I need to get out of here, is my mom was actually diagnosed with breast cancer in October of 2015.

Ashlee Ammons:

Seeing her go through that, go through the diagnosis, go through surgery, go through subsequent radiation and now she's cancer free. I'm very happy to report. Seeing her go through that made me say, "Well wow, look at this woman had who never lost focus on Mixtroz throughout all of what I just described." It was like either I need to be a stellar partner to her or I need to get out of this business and make room for her to find a stellar partner. So that was when I really made the decision to kind of convert over. So once I was in Nashville with my mom, it was just really hard. Honestly from the very beginning of us being in Nashville and let me say, Nashville, it is amazing at if you have a music related startup obviously because

Nashville is music city. Or if you have a health care related startup because Nashville is also a huge healthcare market and Tennessee as a state is very big in healthcare.

Ashlee Ammons:

So when we first got there as what they called, quad outsiders, which is black female non-technical tech co-founders, like that's a whole mouthful. I mean they were just kind of like, "We don't know what to do with you at this point." Now, what I will say is I am at the Nashville Entrepreneur Center. I'm on the board. There's a photo, a humongous photo of Kerry and I in the halls at the Nashville Entrepreneur Center. I am a mentor at the Nashville Entrepreneur Center. So certainly the tides have changed but what I will say is when we first started there, it wasn't welcoming. It wasn't really diverse and inclusive. You know what I mean? They were kind of faking it. I would say now because of the fact that leadership has changed and what not, like within the tech ecosystem, things are getting better. They are trying to do better. It's things like they now actually have a diversity and inclusion officer at the Nashville Entrepreneur Center now, to ensure that those things are happening and it's going and growing.

Ashlee Ammons:

But as far as our timing in Nashville, it was just off. I say this all the time. One of the things that can kill your business the fastest is not being in the right ecosystem. And by right ecosystem, I mean one that is welcoming and supportive. Startups to grow stage businesses, they need support period. It is your job as a founder to figure out where are people who get you, feel you, want to support you, want to purchase your product. You got to go there and you got to conquer. For us that happened to be Birmingham, Alabama. In the fall of 2015 we applied to a program here in Birmingham to scale our company faster. We got into the program and we set foot in Birmingham I think for the first time on January 21st of 2018. And boy oh boy, since then we've been off to the races.

Ashlee Ammons:

The big reason for that is Birmingham is smaller than Nashville, they're a bit more nimble than Nashville. They understand what an ugly past in some instances that they have and they're really working to make it better. They are leaning into women and people of color who are starting businesses and they are being incredibly supportive. Like almost all of the logos in the Birmingham skyline from Regions Bank to Alabama Power are customers of Mixtroz.

Brandt Krueger:

That's honestly why I wanted to spend a fair amount of time kind of on the backstory on this is because I think so many times we do hear those stories that like you say, start at the good part. One of the things that we went through when we talked to the guys from Crowd Mics and heard their entire story. Which literally went from the same kind of origins of like figuring it out at a conference like, "Wow, this is stupid." All the way through there getting bought out. That kind of full entrepreneurial arc, is that the parts that often get left behind are the sacrifices, are the fact that you not only had to pull up roots once, but twice. And watch all of the things that you had saw your mom go through while she's just charging the full head. Then you having to then make

that decision of, "If she's this gung-ho about it, do I have to do it? I should probably be a little more committed."

Ashlee Ammons:

Do you know what's so funny? Let me say these two quotes to you in this audience and I think this will illustrate exactly why we moved to Birmingham. So when I speak like in my keynote, I have these two slides back to back. The first slide says, "The Nashville no." So there's this thing called the Nashville no. You've heard this phrase if you live in the area. Basically it's like people will kill you on the way to no. Because it's in the South so people don't really want to tell you no, even though the answer's no. As entrepreneurs know getting to no fast is amazing. Tell me no so I can move on. Don't just keep telling me yes to like placate me. So my mom had been at a forum and she was asking a question and a gentleman on the stage, he happened to be a person of color as well. He said to her, "I've heard of your business and unfortunately you're a black woman in the South and this is just not going to happen for you."

Ashlee Ammons:

So that's what he said and that was kind of like the end of the conversation. Then my very next slide in the same presentation is a slide. It's a picture of us and the mayor of Birmingham, Randall Woodfin, where it's at an event that we're having celebrating where we raised over \$1 million to grow this business. His quote was, "Not only do we want you, but we support you 100%." That's a big difference.

Brandt Krueger:

Well, I mean, what a huge vindication that had to feel like, I mean, just going from the we don't want you. Almost literally, we don't want your kind here. I mean, almost literally.

Ashlee Ammons:

Literally.

Brandt Krueger:

Yeah. To yes, not only we want you specifically. So that's got to be just a real feel good moment for you.

Ashlee Ammons:

It certainly is. I mean, they're living to their word. We actually just activated an event for the city of Birmingham this past Tuesday.

Brandt Krueger:

So they literally wanted you.

Ashlee Ammons:

Yes. I was like, "They're literally doing the thing." So yeah, so no that is-

Brandt Krueger:

Talking the talk and walking the walk.

Ashlee Ammons:

Guess what? I live for people who talk the talk and walk the walk.

Brandt Krueger:

Nice. All right. Well, I think we've teased it long enough. I think it's probably time to get into the nitty gritty. Let's tell the folks a little bit about Mixtroz. Where you finally landed after all of that research, all of that development, all of the ups and downs, the hardship and pain. Tell us about where the product is at today and what it does.

Ashlee Ammons:

Absolutely. Well, thank you guys. I'm super jazzed about this. So here we go. So when I explain Mixtroz, I find like when I'm on demo calls or like my team is on demo calls, like that kind of thing. One thing that we say is, so let's relate Mixtroz in terms of Slack. You know what Slack is? The messaging application.

Brandt Krueger:

Yeah. I think most of us at this point that listen to this show a fair amount because it's come up multiple times. Because Will and I brought it up in tools that we use. We talked about it actually in the episode dedicated to event communications. So I think most of us, if not go back, start at episode one and listen and you'll hear all of the Slack references.

Ashlee Ammons:

Well, so I'm a nerd. I love podcasts. I love taking a look at what others have done so I can avoid potholes, I can learn, I can get to something quickly. So with Slack, what I find fascinating and the founder of Slack says this all the time. He was like, "No one was necessarily looking for a better way to communicate because we all thought we were good with G-chat, I-chat, whatever." But in fact when Slack ruled out because they were offering such a... it was just a beautifully designed platform and because it did it so much better than all the other platforms that we had, people adopted it rapidly. Slack is one of the fastest B2B companies in growth ever. So I find that fascinating. What he says is instead of selling a messaging platform, what they're actually selling is productivity like increased productivity.

Ashlee Ammons:

What they're actually selling is seamless communication in an enterprise, reduce in email clutter. That's all of the things that they're selling, not just simply a messaging platform. So I look at Mixtroz very similarly. People sometimes aren't looking for, "What is something that can make networking better?" People aren't looking for it because they just assume networking is happening at an event or at work or at school or whatever it is. But realistically-

Brandt Krueger:

If you throw a bunch of beer and wine at a room then networking will happen.

Ashlee Ammons:

Correct. I am so glad that you just said that because realistically people go the field of dreams route with networking like if you build it, they will come. Okay, they will come but they're not going to network. When you really want to set people up for successful networking, you have to be intentional about it. So Mixtroz isn't just selling the fact that we mix people together and we provide data. What we are selling is a proactive way to connect people and learn about them and make smarter decisions. It's a purchase that makes sense for the savvy event producer, for the savvy HR person, for the savvy admissions person within an educational institution. Because realistically when I'm selling it to education for example, what I say is, "The purchase or the costs of a mix. If one student in that Mixtroz session makes a connection that leads them to feel more part of the campus community and stays on your campus, Mixtroz pays for itself times, I don't know, times 10."

Ashlee Ammons:

So when we get to the nitty gritty of what Mixtroz actually does. So Brandt let's pretend that you and I are going to a conference today. Let's say that we're walking into the conference right now and we are told by the people at registration, "Go ahead and launch the Mixtroz app. Mixtroz is going to get you your lunchtime seat for today." So you and I would go into the event and in about two and a half minutes we would go through the Mixtroz profile interface. So I would launch the application. I would then see a branded screen that is branded for the conference or whomever is sponsoring the app at this conference. We would then do a virtual name tag. So that's name, email, address and snapping a selfie.

Ashlee Ammons:

We do the snapping of the selfie because people look vastly different from day to day, specifically women hair up, down. We also found in beta testing that when we let people pick their own pictures, they pick the craziest things like their dog, baby. All these things and we just really need to know what you look like today. That's going to make it easier for your group to find you. Then we simply ask you for your name and email address because that's easy information that everyone has top of mind. When you start asking people to log in through third party apps, it gives them pause because people understand today what a data breach is. So again, that's us really paying attention to human behavior. So after you get through that, inside of the app, you are asked 10 multiple choice questions. Those questions are customized by our customers ahead of time. So depending on what the point of the conference is, they ask questions that correlate to that.

Ashlee Ammons:

Then the cool thing is and this is what makes us different from anything else that's out there on the market. You as an organizer are able to weigh each question. So let's say question one is I traveled from, and your choices are North, South, East, West. As the organizer you can say, "Group all people that came from the North in the same grouping." Or you can say, "Give me a

mixture of all these answers in my groupings." Or finally you can just collect that data and it won't have any bearing on the groupings that are made." So after the attendee gets through the series of 10 questions, they are done. They will reach a countdown clock and they can background Mixtroz. So until lunchtime, they just continue on with the event run of show as they would normally. Then about 10 minutes before lunch, everyone simultaneously gets a push notification.

Ashlee Ammons:

It shows you the group you've been matched with and which table you're going to. Once your group gets to the table and checks in inside of the app, conversation starters are provided to get the conversation started. Also you get to see the group data. You can see why your group was actually matched. So you can see, six of us travel from the North and we like the color blue and whatever else. What's amazing to see each and every time we run a mix is humanity kicks back in. People just naturally start doing what they do when they collide with new people. But what Mixtroz has done is provided them a crutch let's say. to ensure that that connection actually happens. Then at the same time, all of the data that's been collected, survey style and the app is visualized immediately for an event organizer. They can download it, share it, all of that good stuff. So Mixtroz is a tool that increases engagement and collects data where 50 or more are gathered.

Brandt Krueger:

Boom. Well, okay, thanks everybody.

Ashlee Ammons:

Thank you and goodbye.

Brandt Krueger:

No, but that's one of the things that I actually like about it. One of the reasons that I wanted to have you guys on is that it is a product that is easy to understand and it's easy to kind of wrap your head around. It does actually in a way that a lot of some of the other ones don't solve the simplest of problems of the old colored dot on the name tag thing. And how you mix people and all of those things up is obviously totally under control of the planner but something that you can put some thought into in advance of how you do and don't want people to mix. That was one of the features that really kind of stuck out to me as we originally talked, was this idea of, if you want, yes, everyone from the North to be together and everyone in the South to be together.

Brandt Krueger:

But then the intentional mixing based on how they answered those questions can really be a powerful thing. Almost going back to the diversity of thought conversation that we were having earlier. That having disability to kind of sub-categorize the folks and get people together intentionally based on how they answer those questions, I think has a lot of potential.

Ashlee Ammons:

I mean, absolutely. That's what we find. Our customers and the use cases, they use Mixtroz for like... it honestly fascinates me. I went with the example of lunch because that's certainly one of our customer's favorite use cases like lunch or dinner seating because again, that is a great time to connect. But humans naturally sit with people they know. Like if I'm going to a conference, if I'm not thinking about it, I'm going to sit next to my mom. I don't need to sit next to my mom. I know her super well. That is an extraordinary time for me to meet someone else. Like to figure out what synergy I have with that person that already... Just sit with someone that I know. One use case that sticks out to me is one of our customers is the Kauffman Foundation. They had a conference where they were bringing in like ecosystem builders from all over the United States and actually some internationally. There were 500 people in a room and they needed to divvy those people up into project teams and Mixtroz was used to facilitate that.

Ashlee Ammons:

All 500 get in the software, in seconds it breaks them up into teams based on where they came from, what issues are most prevalent like in their area, what are they most interested in learning, et cetera and so on. They broke up into those teams and magic happens. I mean, it's things like that that are extraordinary. I heard a story recently of an event that happened in New Orleans and once people were broken up into their groups, there was a young woman in a group and she was a law student in New Orleans. She had mentioned to her group, "I'm a law student, there's actually a judge here locally that I would love to clerk for and that's what I'm interested in right now." Somebody asked her the name of the judge, she said the name and that person said, "Oh, actually I had breakfast with that judge this morning and he's right over there. Let me introduce you."

Ashlee Ammons:

How amazing is that? Again, it's kind of like not an exact science because it's algorithm based. It's based on who shows up and how they answer questions and all of that. But goodness gracious, it's amazing to be able to be a catalyst for that sort of thing. That's what really excites me because frankly, that's exactly how I got the LeBron internship. I do believe that we are all one degree, one connection, one hello away from our own LeBron moment.

Brandt Krueger:

Well and getting up and not sitting down with the folks that you always do. It's amazing what that can do. It does feel like sometimes there's this almost subliminal thing of birds of a feather type thing. Where to the point where literally at one, I was at a conference and I had a couple of, they had the tiny little buffet plates and I had one couple of each hand. I'm struggling, I'm trying to find just a place to sit down and eat. I stumbled my way up to a high boy and I set the plates down and the person says, "Hi Brandt." It was a coworker, former coworker of mine. I was like, I literally wasn't trying, I wasn't looking and I just somehow still wound up sitting next to somebody that I already knew.

Ashlee Ammons:



Can I just say I appreciate you so saying that birds of a feather thing, because like you said, you learn a lot over the course of this entrepreneurial journey. So today I can tell you all that birds of a feather thing is real. It's actually a sociological phenomenon known as homophily. It was studied in depth at Columbia university.

Brandt Krueger:

I always love it when folks, what I can throw out a random metaphor like that and someone can just slam with the knowledge bomb right after that. It makes me feel like I almost planned that.

Ashlee Ammons:

It's like I told y'all like, I'm a nerd. If you look at my Instagram, you might be like, "Oh, that's a cool girl." No, I'm telling y'all, I'm very in my head.

Brandt Krueger:

Awesome. All right. A couple of more questions here as we wind down. First of all, I have to ask, is there anything that we didn't cover that you feel like we still need to?

Ashlee Ammons:

Well, the one thing that I would say you asked and I don't know if I answered this question fully. Like where are we today? That's a good question.

Brandt Krueger:

Yeah. We've got the whole journey and what's the status of the company today?

Ashlee Ammons:

Yeah. We're in that fun growth stage. This was the first year I have ever had a 2020 marketing meeting. I had a planning meeting about a new year, like a month and a half before the new year hits. That's very exciting to me. Like especially before this year of 2019, the Mixtroz was team was literally my mom, myself, our part-time bookkeeper and our dev team. That was it. Now I have a team team sitting here with me at Birmingham working on this business, building this business, getting this business out there. It just excites me greatly. I mean, we recently launched the third version of Mixtroz. So we called the version before the third version, Old Faithful. It did what it needed to do, but it wasn't necessarily cute, like it wasn't pretty. But now we certainly have the pretty sexy, sleek version. We're built for any tech nerds out there. We're built on the same tech stacks. It's like LinkedIn's app and Facebook's app and all that.

Ashlee Ammons:

So that's very exciting to me because of that we can iterate quite rapidly. So kind of as I looked down in our next few months. Something that I'm very excited about is not only will we have Mixtroz available as application, but we'll also have it available as a web app, like a progressive web app, meaning that no download will be necessary. So while the app works great. In fact, we actually experienced 85% or higher user adoption with Mixtroz at the events that we do. That's because of our customer success and the way we positioned Mixtroz into events. Having a web

app will further reduce the friction, specifically in our conferencing vertical, inside of enterprise and education. That's not really too much of a concern because people end up putting Mixtroz on their phone because they are using it over and over at different events within the system.

Ashlee Ammons:

So that's kind of where we are. It's just an exciting place of planning. We've reached a new level of understanding with our customer. I love learning about them. I love seeing what they do with our software. So we're looking forward to expanding upon that. Every once in a while someone throws a curve ball at us, like I'll get a call from a bride who has read about us and said, "Can I use this at my rehearsal dinner?" I'm like, "Heck yes, you can. Yes, absolutely." So those are the things that kind of really excite me. I mean we're in a... it's a scary place to be for sure because it's just when you're in business like this and I think you could probably relate to this.

Ashlee Ammons:

It's extremely high highs and extremely low lows and then everything in between, but you just kinda got to take it in stride. Like I feel like I have seen the best and worst in myself over the course of this journey, but I honestly, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Brandt Krueger:

Well, great. I mean it sounds like you're in a great position and I definitely wish you the best of luck with the product. Real quick before we start to wrap up, it did occur to me and I can't remember if you said this earlier or not, but is this an app store app or something that is currently a web app? I know you said you're working on progressive web app, but just is it currently in that zone right now?

Ashlee Ammons:

So it's currently a native app, so it's available in Google Play Store and the Apple Store as well. So it's a free download to all the attendees because it is paid for in advanced by whomever the host or sponsor is.

Brandt Krueger:

Then we try and do a thing, we do a thing kind of called jargon jail when we use something that we think people might not fully understand. So I'll take my crack at the simple explanation of a progressive web app. But basically it's a web app that for all intents and purposes looks and acts like a native app, to the point where you can launch it from your start menu or whatever and things like that. But it is actually using web technology to code it and to run it on the backend. Is that a fair description?

Ashlee Ammons:

Yeah, pretty much. I mean, the big reason why we want to do is because an app download is not necessary. So like you can have someone who has downloaded an app and then a person who is launched the app in their Safari browser for example, be in the same mix together. It's just whatever preference they have. When we first built Mixtroz, it had to be a native app

because the technology wasn't where it needed to be for Mixtroz to start on a web app. But now web apps have come like a really far away. So in future somebody who will be able to type in, [mixtroz.com/Coca-Cola](http://mixtroz.com/Coca-Cola), if that's who the event was with, and they would be able to pull up a very similar functionality to our app.

Brandt Krueger:

Very good and the other advantage to that is something that people have been trying to do for literally decades, which is write once, run everywhere. So you write the code once and it runs in all the different platforms and all the different stacks.

Ashlee Ammons:

It's so complicated. That's why I don't code. I do other things.

Brandt Krueger:

I totally understand. So the final question that I have for you is, what is the craziest, fun fact about you that you can think of that somebody might not. I think you already touched on it, but I'll give you an opportunity. Something that somebody might not suspect about you.

Ashlee Ammons:

Oh man. I was going to say, that's an awesome question. Craziest fun fact that somebody might not expect about me. You know what? How about I was a complete band nerd in high school. Like obviously LeBron is a fun fact, but I was a complete band nerd in high school to the fact that I didn't play an instrument, but I was in the color guard and I was in the winter guard and like we competed nationally. At one point the winter guard that I was in, which this is essentially like being indoors, having a dance routine and like having a flag type situation. But we were 12th in the world at that.

Brandt Krueger:

Wow.

Ashlee Ammons:

Yes. So I took that very, very seriously when I was in high school and then funnily enough in college I was a cheerleader. So I don't know. That tell you a little bit about my personality. I'm a little all over the place. I'm one of those people, I tell people all the time, I'm like a master of none, but when I figure out it's something I want to do, I just figure out how to do it. I don't think I was born with any talent really. I think any talent, because I'm lefthanded, I'm kind of a klutz like I fall sometimes. I think I'm just that kind of goofy person but when there's... like I got cut from cheerleading one time when I was in grade school and I was like, "Ooh, never again. And it never happened again." I'm just one of those people like, tell me what I need to figure out to get there or just give me the guidelines and I'll figure out how to get there. I think that that has certainly served me well as an entrepreneur.

Brandt Krueger:

Well, and that's something that Will and I have definitely talked about in the past is the generalist versus specialist. Whether it's comes to people or comes to companies as well. I personally I'm of the opinion that it's more fun to be a generalist because you get to do [crosstalk 00:54:55].

Ashlee Ammons:  
Absolutely.

Brandt Krueger:  
I'm not good at basketball, but I can play basketball. It's much more fun to play basketball, I think than to like, "Oh, I could never do that." Same with any number of sports or activities, music, all of that kind of stuff. It's definitely I think much more fun to be generalist.

Ashlee Ammons:  
Well, I was going to say, I just want to tell people I'm a total of Game of Thrones nerd and because of that, I figured out that I'm randomly pretty good at archery. So I would encourage everyone, if there's something you see that you want to do, just go do it.

Brandt Krueger:  
I think that's a pretty fun fact too is I'm randomly pretty good at archery.

Ashlee Ammons:  
Yeah. And literally the reason is Game of Thrones. I was looking at Game of Thrones and I was like, I could do that.

Brandt Krueger:  
Nice, nice. All right, well, Ashlee, thank you so much for joining us today. I really appreciate it. I really wanted to share your story with the audience today because I thought it was such a great example of just another founding story. Because I think I want to mix these in every now and then as we kind of move along with whatever this little show is. Because I think it's important for people to know the journey that happens. I have a million good ideas a day, but having to actually bring it to fruition is the difference. That difference between, "Well, I thought of that, but I couldn't make it go." And actually making it go. So congratulations on actually making it go.

Ashlee Ammons:  
Well, thank you so, so much. It was honestly a pleasure to be on and I will certainly be listening as you guys go and grow. I'm looking forward to hopefully bringing another tool to your awesome audience here.

Brandt Krueger:  
Fantastic. Well, we want to thank you again for being here. We want to thank you all for listening and remind you that you can get ahold of us using #eventtechpodcast on any of the socials if you want to go old school and email us. I love how email is suddenly old school,

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Brandt Krueger:

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