

Transcript of Invent Like An Owner podcast interview with Maryam Mohit

<https://inventlikeanowner.com/podcast/maryam-mohit-how-amazon-used-imagination-and-technology-to-invent-for-customers/>

NOTE – this “transcript” is auto-generated by a computer, so expect a fair number of typos. Hopefully it’s useful to find specific sections in you want to do a ‘CTRL-F’ search.

Dave Schappell: [00:00:48] Hi, I’m Dave Schappell. And I’d like to welcome you to the Invent Like an Owner Podcast, where I talk with the Amazonians who help build amazon.com into one of the world’s most valuable companies. This weekly podcast is for entrepreneurs and business leaders. The goal of the podcast is to capture the Amazon creation stories and create a historical archive.

On that note, my guests are recalling history as best they can. It’s possible. Some of the details are fuzzy or just plain wrong. If that happens, it’s not intentional. And I invite future guests or commenters on the website to help us get the facts as straight as they can be. Now on with the show today, I’m excited, really excited to be talking with Maryam Mohit, who started at Amazon in June, 1996 as the site producer or VP site development.

She’ll tell us which title came first. She was tasked with making the website interactive unquote, and that came from Jeff. And boy did she and her team ever do that. She ended up with a team of more than 200 front end engineers, web developers. Designers editors and researchers and she and her team left an indelible stamp on the Amazon experience.

That lasted well beyond when she left in 2003. When you look up Amazonian in the virtual dictionary, you’ll see Maryam. Hi there, Maryam.

Maryam Mohit: [00:02:01] Hey Dave.

Dave Schappell: [00:02:02] So, this is going to be a really fun, and I know that because Marianne and I spoke a few days ago and she has a treasure trove of uh, artifacts.

If you will, she kept everything. I, I be as afraid to see her attic. So before we dive into all of that, I'd love Marin. Just give us the story about how you got to Amazon. It was very early, so it's sort of, I think it's a good place to start.

Maryam Mohit: [00:02:23] Yeah. So I well, before I came to Amazon, my first job out of college was at random house, the book publisher in New York, in the editorial department.

And so I knew a lot about the book business and a lot of the frustrations with the book business. So I fast forward a bit. I had. Gone to work at a CD rom publishing company. I was a producer at a CD rom publishing company that's before the web was a thing that, you know, was a commercial thing that people could use.

And I had gone on to another software company after that, to startups and I ended up living in Seattle. So there I was living in Seattle, it the beginning of 1996. And I was at that time working for a company that was a Israeli software company based in Tel Aviv. And I was going back and forth between pilot Televiv, New York, the west coast.

It was really. Grilling little, did I know what was to come later with Amazon, but I was sitting there in Seattle and everyone had been telling me, you know, you should really start your own business. You should start your own business. And so I have two ideas for businesses that I wanted to start.

One was an electronic greeting cards company, and the other was an electronic bookstore. The browser had recently come out. I was really frustrated with some of the limitations of shrink wrap software, because you know, you work really hard. You create the CD, you'd send it off to get pressed and it would go off into the world.

And then the minute it shipped, you would find some bug and furthermore, there, there was no way for you to know. How it was landing with your users. There was no way to get feedback from the people who used it and then incorporate that into making the product even better. And I found that really frustrating.

I, I would be on all these panels to do with interactive media. And I would, I felt like such a fraud because I felt like this media is not interactive. And then when I first saw the first web browser, I was like, Wow, this is an interactive medium. So there I was sitting in Seattle in my kitchen, writing a business plan for opening an online bookstore.

And then in the same week, three people who didn't know each other, but three people I knew all wrote to me and they said, Hey, you're thinking about starting an online bookstore. There's this guy named Jeff who just launched an online bookstore in Seattle, you should go talk to him. So I said, okay, that sounds great.

And I sent him an email and I said, Hey. You just launched an online bookstore. I want to launch an online bookstore let's chat. So I went down there to to meet with him. And, you know, he, the first, basically the first thing he said to me was, can you help make the site interactive? And I was like, yeah, I can totally help make the site interactive because I had been doing CD rom stuff.

I'd been doing other kind of children's educational software before that. And actually the interview was really interesting because I had been in two softwares. I had been in two software startups before Amazon. And when I met Jeff and I just, you know, he was so analytical, he was so smart. He had just such a great sense about him.

I thought to myself, wow, this guy is, this guy is the real deal. He is a real ill. And I remember him showing me, you know, very confidentially his plan to go public. So, this is in June of 1996 is a plan to go public. And I remember

saying to him, Why would you want to do that? Like what possible, you know, then like there's not going to be all these people breathing down your neck.

I mean, I was so not business oriented, but I'm really excited about the idea of using technology to kind of be subversive. So at the time everyone was talking about the demise of the book and how technology was going to be in that nobody ever read a book again. And I just loved the idea of. Using technology to help more people read more books and better books.

And more of the books they want. I mean, that was one of the things I had learned from being in the book business was that there was such a, there was no way really for a book to find its audience, you would publish a novel, a wonderful novel. You knew that there were like 30,000 people in the U S who would love that novel.

And there was no way for that novel to that's people are the people to find the novel. So it seemed like the internet was just this amazing technology to, to kind of. Bring books and people together and yeah. So that's basically how I joined. So you were, you were hired and I know you told me you were hired in June, but you didn't start until October.

What's sort of like you were yeah. Yeah, go ahead. I was gonna say, I answered that. And, and then babies, just talk about what was your first thing you were tasked with? Like probably, I know we're going to sort of cover a bunch of big launches from when you started until maybe the five late 98, but like, so how, you know, how were you brought in and, and then what were you tasked with right out of the gate?

Yeah. So when I interviewed and was offered the job in June, there were 25 people in the company. And right after I was given the offer, I found out that my father had cancer. And so I said, Hey, you know, I would love to take this job, but I need to help my father through this surgery and recovery and et cetera.

And so, I ended up starting in October and by the way, my father is fine. He's 88 years old, so it all worked out. But so when I started in October and. Basically, I wasn't really tasked with anything. I was tasked it's with looking at the website and figuring out what to do. Right. So, it was sort of a blank slate.

Now, the website at the time, we'll call it V1. It was HTML 1.0, blue, black type white background, blue links. There was no navigation. There was no. Search was not on the homepage. I know you did an interview with Ruben or take it. And Dwayne Bowman, two of our early wonderful engineers, and they talked about the issues with search at that time, that search results were alphabetical.

And you know, you had to fill in multiple different boxes to kind of form your query. So search was sort of behind the main page. And so what I first did and oh, and I should say at that time, Who was the team. We obviously had the core engineering team and then we had one web developer, one HTML developer, whose name was Chris mili.

We called him Mooky. And I think the first hire I made was our first QA tester miles lane. And his job was to pound on the site and find bugs so that we could fix them. So, uh, and then we had a very small editorial team. Who would review books and write the text for the homepage as Susan Benson was the head of that.

And so, um, So the first thing that, um, we did was we went out and talked to customers. We looked at our, at our customer service cues. We looked at what people were telling us. We talk to customers, we write to them, call them up to understand what were the problems that they were having with the website.

Dave Schappell: [00:09:28] What was that formal surveys or were you literally just having open-ended. You know, uh, questions for them about, you know, issues they may be having, or that sort of.

Maryam Mohit: [00:09:37] So this is the, this is what the website looked like.

Dave Schappell: [00:09:41] Hm that's great. Cool. Still need to get a copy of that for the, uh, for the, your blog page.

Maryam Mohit: [00:09:46] Yeah. So, you know, we say announcing 40% off the Amazon 500, um, spotlight, November 3rd, every day, we would have a new book that was being spotlight. This was the psychology of influence, which is kind of. Hilarious considering that it's Amazon, um, uh, books reviewed in the New York times book reviewed its national humor month, a first look at partner.

So there was sort of like an, almost like a newsletter. Right. But, but there was, but if you were going to the site and you were like, oh, I know what I want. I need a book about how to get my child to sleep through the night. Like there was no really easy way for you to find that. Right. And so. The first thing we did was to add some navigation, just really a simple side navigation bar to help people find the different parts of the site and to be into, to, to, um, be able to find the things that they were looking for.

Dave Schappell: [00:10:43] And part of the reason that part of the reason search wasn't on the homepage at that time is because it probably wasn't that great. Right. So it was, you know, yeah. I mean, it did get added and you'll, you'll talk to that, but that was one of the issues that we talked about with Dwayne Ruben.

Maryam Mohit: [00:10:56] Right. Exactly.

Because the search results were alphabetical. So if you were looking for, I think one of the examples they used was, uh, John Grisham's a partner, you know, you might find 25 30 books, right? No, I'm a partner of this, a partner of that, you know, before you found the book that you were actually looking for.

Dave Schappell: [00:11:15] Um, one other thing that the checkout process was, why was the checkout process like 12 pages, I guess.

Why it could be, but what was it just also elementary or were they people worried and having to allay people's concerns every step of the way? Like why did, why was it so delayed?

Maryam Mohit: [00:11:31] Yeah. So the checkout process really was 12 pages. And well, first you had a first, you had a screen where you had to choose whether you wanted to go to the secure server or not.

Right. So that was the first thing you had to do. And then you had each step was separate. Um, you know, and I mean, right now there's a single page for checkout at Amazon going from that 12 pages to that single page. That actually was much later, but we were, we were holding people's hands. I mean, at that time we still took checks, right.

Because people were very afraid of putting their credit card on the internet.

Dave Schappell: [00:12:07] Yeah. So basically for listeners, people could check out the entire pipeline. They could indicate that I am going to pay by check and I'm going to mail the check-in. Then I guess we would email them, or it would appear on the screen, the instructions on where to send their check and how much to make it up.

Maryam Mohit: [00:12:22] Exactly. No check. And then once we got the check, we would send them the book. And we, you know, we could say at that time, I don't remember whether we could actually see at that time when the books were going to leave the warehouse, like we had very little ability to tell you what we certainly could not tell you when the books were going to arrive on your doorstep.

Right. I don't think we could even tell you when they were going to leave the warehouse, we would just take order. So, um, and each step of the way we had text explaining how everything worked and all of this, because no one had ever done this before. No one knew what it was like to do. Buy something online.

It was like a new concept.

Dave Schappell: [00:12:59] And so at the time was Barnes and noble, were they online or were they just the big, scary, you know.

Maryam Mohit: [00:13:06] They were the big, the man, they, they launched right around them and we used to study their site. We used to look at what they were doing. They were huge compared to us. We thought, oh my God, how will we ever catch up with Barnes and noble?

Um, later on in V3 of the site where we launched a really robust browse hierarchy that was in part to compete with Barnes and noble because they had browsing by category. And we really didn't.

Dave Schappell: [00:13:33] So let's so leaving that was the basic website. Uh, there was no navigation and maybe what you were even showing me right.

There was V2, but I know V2 launched sometime in 1996. Can you talk about some of the things? Was it basically just adding search to the homepage and, uh, you know, a few other things or B two was.

Maryam Mohit: [00:13:54] Actually in V2 search wasn't even on the homepage yet. Okay. That came later. So V2 had a left-hand rail navigation.

That was the main thing that we changed in V2. And it also had a visual design. So some of the things that we had in this navigation board at the top, we had to. Well, first of all, we had text only as Alex Edelman mentioned in your interview. We had a text only site that we had searched by author title, subject keyword, ESPN, and then advanced search query, where you could basically create your own bully in search terms.

Dave Schappell: [00:14:28] Can you show that image again? Just on the screen? It's just it's yeah, so it is much more visually appealing already. Like you can see the layout in the boxes, that sort of stuff.

Maryam Mohit: [00:14:38] I can see. There's the cover image here and it has a pricing. Sticker on it, 40% off. So we have applied those pricing stickers to the images and it had this visual design that organized things.

It also had, it also had promotions, right? Um, lowest, everyday prices save up to 40% largest selection, you know, and it shows the bar graph with how much selection we have compared to. The largest secrets storage.

Dave Schappell: [00:15:05] That's pretty aggressive, right?

Maryam Mohit: [00:15:08] Aggressive, very aggressive firm. Okay.

Dave Schappell: [00:15:10] But he, that says they never focus on competitors. That's a pretty, it's a customer promise, but it's a competitor message in. And so tell me the story you said that, uh, I remember you talking about, you had a memo, maybe it was pre-launched with all the Jeff's notes on back around that launch.

Maryam Mohit: [00:15:27] Hold on. I'm going to get that sure. Somewhere in there, right around that time.

Where you were saying, okay, we're going to redesign the site. And we set out goals for the redesign and what, you know, some of our goals were communicate that Amazon has vast selection, good prices. It's trustworthy. That was a really big thing being trustworthy. How do I know that I can like give you my credit card?

And these books are actually going to show up on my doorstep. That was a big leap. Um, that Amazon is fun that you can find what you want. You can get it easily. And so we. A bunch of, um, uh, let's see, hold on. How can I explain this? Um, so we did a beta test. I don't remember the exact details of the beta test, but in that beta test, we got a bunch of comments from users, from customers and here they are.

Yep. Okay. And, um, And Jeff get Jeff. I read those comments. I read every single comment. Jeff read every single comment and he gave back a lot of comments on like what he thought was important. And I think the point here is that, you know, from the early these days, we were really focused on the customers.

Jeff was we're really focused on the customers. I was, everyone was really focused on the customers and just trying to see where his notes are. Oh, yeah.

Dave Schappell: [00:16:58] I think I remember you telling me, like he emphasized, you know, that it didn't mean do exactly what they asked for. Right? It's it's, it's like, listen to what they're saying, what their problems are, you know, it's our job to feel their pain, but then B use what we know about technology and what's possible to solve it.

Maryam Mohit: [00:17:16] Yeah. I mean, I think actually, like if you were to ask me, what's the big lesson that I take away from Amazon, that you. Probably want to ask me about it at the end, but I mean, to me, the big lesson is to listen to the customers, listen to them, tell you what their problems are, and then sit quietly and really, really think about how we can use technology to solve this problems in a way that they can never even imagine.

Right. So they're not going to tell you, I want one click shopping, but they are going to tell you, wow. It is really tedious to go through this 12 page order form. Right? Right. And so that's where the innovation comes in. That's where the invention goes in, comes in. When you take listening to your customer's problems in their own voices, and then using what you know about technology to invent something they never would have.

Dave Schappell: [00:18:05] Yeah. Cause you can also imagine they're leaving feedback saying I don't mind doing it once, but typing in all this information every single time, I always ship it to the same place. And at some points, some light bulb went off and somebody said one click. I think it was Jeff's, but

he's like. Wait a second, we have all this, we should just make it a single click or two clicks, you know, or something like that to get it done.

And that's, uh, you know, as far as I remember from the stories, that's kind of what happened and to the point where it was like a scary feature, right? Like the, the one-click fee, like, wasn't it pretty contentious. Oh, might internally.

Maryam Mohit: [00:18:35] Do you mind me to tell, tell them.

Dave Schappell: [00:18:37] Yeah, definitely tell the one quick story. It's like, great.

Maryam Mohit: [00:18:39] Okay. So this, this is a little bit later on.

Dave Schappell: [00:18:42] Background around one click, just because again, one clicks gone from the website now. So you might just, it's kind of self obvious, but maybe just to explain real quickly what it's just gone. Yeah.

Maryam Mohit: [00:18:53] Okay. So, so we had this 12 page order form and you know, that was really tedious and.

One day and we all knew it was tedious. And we heard that customers were complaining about, about that. And then one day Jeff comes down and he says, we need to have one click ordering on the website. And we're like, what do you mean one-click ordering? And you know, we need to do, I just have a button where they just click it and then the order just goes.

So we were like, wow, that's really interesting. That's, that's new, that's different. And so we started to work on it. We started to design it. The engineers started to work on the technology to, to build it and all of this. But the story I want to tell about is what happens once we had done all the technical work and we had done the visual design and we had done the UI design.

We said, let's go show it to some users. So we took it down to the warehouse and we showed this, um, prototype to a bunch of people who were working in the warehouse and they hated it. They were so freaked out. They were like, what do you mean? I just click this button and, and how did you get my credit card?

And, and is this going to come? What if I don't want it? What if I did it by mistake? I mean, they were really upset and so. I think it was Laurie Bort and I, she was another, um, program manager. We went back to Jeff and we said, Jeff, you know, this it's like, wow. People are really scared. One click is just too far.

It's we're going too far. What if we make it to click? What if we make it like you click and then you confirm. Like, yeah, that would be great. He's like, no, it has to be one click. So we just, we were like, oh my God, what are we going to do? How are we going to make this palatable to people? We love the boldness of it, but it has this problem.

So we kind of went back to the drawing board. I can't remember who exactly came up with it, but we ended up coming up with this idea, putting a little tiny nine point font in parentheses under the button that says. You can always, or you have 90 minutes to cancel.

Dave Schappell: [00:20:57] Your 30 minutes or 90 minutes to cancel.

Maryam Mohit: [00:20:59] 90 minutes, you have 90 minutes to cancel. Um, just like under the shopping cart, we had tiny little font that said add to cart, and then you can always change your mind later or something like that. So we added this tiny little reassuring text, and then we went back and we showed it to a group of users again, and they loved it. So it was just, I just think it was, it's a great story because you're taking this combination of.

Bold solution use, you know, user problem, bold solution, then getting user feedback again, tweaking it just a little bit. And then off you go and yeah, really was revolutionary for him.

Dave Schappell: [00:21:36] And it goes from abhorrent. To, you know, people are totally turned off by it to something like, oh yeah, this is great. I get it now. And it was really just a few words in the right placement.

Maryam Mohit: [00:21:45] Just a few words with the right tone, with the right sensitivity to understanding what was going on emotionally for those users at that moment.

Dave Schappell: [00:21:55] Right. Yeah. And there's thousands of those over the years, but that one really sticks with people. I, I spoke with, um, Jen Caste, who was our VP of our first VP of marketing.

And we'll be interviewing her about some other stuff. And this, she told the same story. So it like really resonated. She was like, I remember engineers were really upset about this. And Jeff just had a clear vision of what he wanted and he stuck to it. But at the same time, it's not like we shipped it the way it was when people hated it down in the warehouse, you know, we made tweaks to, based on the feedback that and the concerns people had.

Maryam Mohit: [00:22:27] Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So really trying to understand, like, what was the thing that was bothering them? We knew this was going to solve a big problem, but we also had to address their emotional state at the moment.

Dave Schappell: [00:22:39] So that's a, one-click launched with V3 and by the way, I went back and found the press release in September of 97. What I think V3 also had instant wrecks, like, and I think you had a story about, yeah.

Maryam Mohit: [00:22:52] Yeah. So thinking about V3, I know that you've talked about it a lot on a lot of people, bring it up and say, well, what's the big deal with V3. So I think really fundamentally, um, one of the big deals about V3 version three, Was that it was one of the first times where we really packaged up a whole set of features into one release date.

And we were going to send out a press release about it. So before that we had done a site redesign, you know, and made tweaks and change feature things like when we wanted to we'd roll them out when they were ready. But this was a release that was bundling these things all together. And. Um, some of the things that were in this version were one click.

There was, um, this thing we called bookmatch her, which was one of our early forays into doing recommendations for people. We had this idea of instant wrecks, which was instant recommendations that you could see right on the homepage. Um, we had our browse taxonomy, which was a big project that we did. We also added navigation at the very top.

What we call chicklet navigation. That was little black boxes with little colorful kind of Chiclets sticking out. Right. Across the top and then also can rock Miller. The technical program manager leads to Kim and I were kind of, um, partners in everything we did. She was the technical program manager lead.

I was, I think, I don't even remember what my title was, but I was basically the program manager lead on the non-technical side. And so Kim talked about how we did all these underlying hardware architecture changes. At the same time going from single server to multiple servers. So we bundle all of these things together in this one release and David Risher, who was, I think he was the VP of product development.

At that time. I have to say titles were just at least not a thing. I had so many different titles over the years at Amazon, and I just really never paid attention to them. But, um, But one of the things that he told me when we were putting together this package of features is that you've got to have at least one thing that you can talk about to the outside world.

That's going to get buzz that people are going to want to talk about and tell their friends about. And so for us, that was one click and these instant recommendations, because otherwise, you know, we would have talked about, oh, well, we're adding, you know, Navigation and brows. Yeah. Or underlying hardware architecture.

And you know, that the customers would be like, yeah, what is it doing for me? Right. So, yeah.

Dave Schappell: [00:25:17] Yeah. David always had a really good sense of like, cause instant recommendations is a really, that's something people can gravitate to, especially reporters and they can experience it themselves and then gush about it in their stories, you know? And so, yeah. Yeah.

Maryam Mohit: [00:25:32] Greg Linden is the engineer who really developed that and hopefully you'll be talking to him. Um, Later to go into how he did that. But one of the principle things that I saw engineers do over and over again at Amazon was I think just so brilliant was they would use customer behavioral data to make a better experience for the customers.

And so that's one of the themes that really comes out for me from my early years at Amazon, was that everybody was focused on the customer. Jeff was focused on the customer. I was focused on customer, the designers, the engineers, the writers, everyone was focused on the customers. The engineers were thinking, how can I make this better for people, right.

With the Botega boxes, they were thinking, how can we make search better? Oh, we can use user behavioral data to create better search results. Right. You know? Oh, we can say people who bought this also bought that that's going to help people find things that they want to buy. So, yeah.

Dave Schappell: [00:26:29] And after V3 was, uh, we haven't talked about a post-mortem in any of the episodes yet.

I don't know if V3 is a good one or if there's a different, uh, and maybe just tell people, tell listeners again, maybe sounds self-explanatory but in the technology world, postmortems are more of a thing.

Maryam Mohit: [00:26:47] Yeah. So, um, Kim Rockefeller and I thought that after every major project, we should do a post-mortem.

Which is sort of a depressing term. Cause you think that it's something that you do after something dies. When in fact we were doing it after something had been born this new release, but we did these postmortems where we would get together, everyone who had worked on the project in any way, shape or form.

And we would ask them these questions, what went well, what could be better? And so let's see where's that postpartum. So for, for V3 and V4, we did a post-mortem. And I think it's interesting. I had all these things laid out just before we met and now I can't find that's no problem. Okay. So here it is. So, so this, these were our conclusions, and I think this is interesting because it speaks to some of the things that were top of mind for the team.

So this was the post-mortem after V4. And what we said was what was good in the B3 and still good in V4. What was bad in V3 and better in V4 and what was bad in V3 and still bad in Veeva? I will say that I think that we were all tried to be like very kind of self critical and realistic and kind of own up to what was working and what wasn't working.

Um, because we were all kind of obsessed with making things better all the time. Right? So in V4, these are the things that were good in V3 and still good in V4. We launched. We had moved into interdepartmental work. We did user testing. We had weekly huddles and a war team. The project had clearly defined aims.

We were flexible when necessary, but we maintain discipline and we improved our liaison with customer service. Yes. Customer service. If I can just take a slight detour customer service was such an important part of what we did. It was like, Customer service fed us information constantly about what was going on for our customers.

What were their pain points? What were the delights? And we all worked in customer service. We all worked in the QS and we all answered customer service emails, which was an incredibly important way for us to be close to the

customers and to understand how we could make things better for them. So I was going to say, here's the things that were bad in V3 and better.

And before we got consistent, relevant, Mail lists. I don't even know what that means. Clear ownership of jobs and responsibilities and areas, which means that we didn't have that in V3. So you did have it in before we kept our work groups, small, we brought customer service in even earlier. We cut features early, that speaks to it.

Another concept that I'm sure has been brought up brutal triage, um, and we gave the project enough resources to get their jobs done on time. And then here were the things that were bad in V3 and still bad in before we did not do enough testing of internal and backend tools, we had inconsistent build schedules and communication failures, and we had technical problems with the builds.

Yeah. So I think that gives a little, a little bit insight into how we were the kinds of issues we were dealing with.

Dave Schappell: [00:30:05] I got there about nine months after that memo was probably done. But the thing I remembered, which was impressive, like on the feedback part, it was that we actually used it like, you know, now 20 years have gone by, or maybe more than that, which sadly, but like, I almost get like a rash when somebody says let's do a customer survey because I have had so many experiences, not at Amazon where we do this survey and it just.

Never gets used or it's so complicated or whatever. And I always felt like, um, you and your team just did a really good job of not just executing it well, but then incorporating it. But then the second part, and then I'll shut up is, uh, is postmortems because it's really the postmortems, not just about what went right.

And when we're wrong, it's about how do we make the process better the next time so that we can, because this is going to keep on happening. We're not

going to, there's going to be more launches and more product releases and, you know, sort of try to make the, the process or the mechanisms better.

Maryam Mohit: [00:30:58] Yeah. I mean, those were really important because it, it would be easy to just launch in and then go headlong into the next thing.

Especially when we were, we felt we were under a huge time pressure to do everything as fast as humanly possible, but taking the time to do those postmortems into and, and to do them broadly, you know, that everyone who was involved in the project. Um, and like for example, one technique that we used in the post-mortem on the five, which was the music launch, which was another really big launch for us.

Dave Schappell: [00:31:28] I paused just that let's just put a bow on V3 and V4 because V3 was sort of in September, you can think of that. There's a lot of things there, but one click and instant Rex, like they were, it was really big. And then V4. I think we snuck it out right before the holidays in 97. It was, you know, and I, I guess the big thing there was gift certificates, but you'll, you'll probably tell me there was a few things.

Maryam Mohit: [00:31:50] V4 was a holiday release, it combined gift certificates, a gift center. We added a new chiclet to the navigation gift center. Amazon kids. Um, those were the main things about, about V4. So it wasn't as big as a, it didn't combine as many things as V3, but it gave us something to talk about in the run-up to the holidays, which was of course huge for us.

Dave Schappell: [00:32:14] Well, and also just to put in perspective for listeners. Gift certificates were really novel back then. And it was a way for us to sell things or quote unquote book revenue, right up until literally hours before Christmas, because a person could come and buy a gift certificate and give it to someone. And so it was a way when we can no longer ship things on time, it was a really big innovation, right.

Maryam Mohit: [00:32:38] It was a huge innovation for us to be able to say, like, even on Christmas Eve, there's still something that we could do for you.

Right. I think we ha you know, we really had this kind of Santa Claus feeling like we, we were so committed to getting people, their stuff for Christmas. I remember one customer service rep who literally took an order, put it in the back of their truck and drove, you know, hours to deliver this, this, um, package to someone because it was for their kid on Christmas.

Right. So, um, so we were, we were very obsessed with, I keep using the word obsession. I think this is a theme. We were very obsessed with, you know, trying to give people a good holiday experience.

Dave Schappell: [00:33:19] And, and, uh, I remember you mentioned that December of that year, I don't know what the exact date was, but we had our first big new Yorker cartoon, which was, yeah.

Maryam Mohit: [00:33:29] I, you know, I've always been a big new Yorker reader. And when I opened up the new Yorker and there was this cartoon, um, it was actually. Very un-PC. It showed two people in a bookstore in a, in a Torrid passionate embrace. And the one person saying to the other one is, as you know, they're kind of ripping off their clothes saying this would never happen on amazon.com.

It's awesome. Yeah. I was like the new Yorker brew, like big time.

Dave Schappell: [00:33:59] Now we'll put that in the, uh, I'll put that on the podcast page for this one. It's great.

Maryam Mohit: [00:34:05] No, it was really the kind of thing where, you know, I had moved from New York to Seattle and every time I would go back to New York, the first time. You know, people say, what are you doing out there on the west coast?

And I'd say, well, you know, there's this thing called the internet. Have you heard of it? No, what's that, you know, and then I'd go back a few months later and then I'd say, well, you know, I'm working at this place. They're like, what

are you doing out there in Seattle? There's this thing called an online bookstore.

What's that, you know? And then each time I go back, they would sort of know a little bit more until finally I would go back east and they would say, oh yeah, I ordered from amazon.com.

Dave Schappell: [00:34:36] Yeah. Yeah, it was really fun. It was a good cocktail party conversation piece. By the time I got there, like you're working at Amazon. That's awesome. I love it. Um, but you, you all were there before anybody sort of knew what it was or even what online shopping was. Excellent.

Maryam Mohit: [00:34:50] And I will say, I will say one thing when I was. When I interviewed with Amazon and I had, you know, a week or two to think about the job offer, um, I went to all around Seattle to talk to other people doing kind of informational.

What else is going on in Seattle? Kind of chats. And I talked to VCs, I talked to, you know, different startup people. I talked to lots and lots of different people. Every single person I talked to said, don't join Amazon. Every single person, they thought it was nuts. They thought it was crazy. Um, they thought it would never work.

And so I just want to say to people out there, if you know, I had a, I had a conviction based on my own experience and my also belief in Jeff that this was the right thing to do. And I just want to say to people out there, when you have that conviction, just like don't. Don't listen to what the naysayers say.

Dave Schappell: [00:35:40] Well, it's also the worst thing that the worst thing that happens really as it fails. Yeah.

Maryam Mohit: [00:35:46] And so what, then you move on to the next thing.

Dave Schappell: [00:35:48] Yeah, I was going to say my, my inspiration was I was, I ran a bulletin board when I was in high school, you know, on my apple two plus with a modem, you know, like war games and I just stopped using it until they all happened.

And sort of when I saw AOL, I'm like, oh, I know what that is. That's what we used to do. Yeah. So I didn't really need to be convinced about it. I was excited, but I was really in love with the bookstore and then, you know, everything else was, was gravy. So that this is a good, just for the listener now in 35 minutes or so we've gone from you arriving.

With that static page with black text on white background. So now we have a much better looking homepage with search, with recommendations, you know, with navigation that works in browse and competitive features, let's talk, it gives certificates and a holiday store. I mean, Just think about how much that changed.

Then we also just today released Alex Edelman's episode. Alex did the, and he was wrestling with HTML one dot O you know, like really simple tool. So it's, you have to put it into context of why that was really difficult back then, you know, to, to get all of that done with the technology in the state. It was.

Maryam Mohit: [00:36:55] Oh yeah, absolutely. And I mean, you know, when we're talking about HTML 1.0, we're basically like writing every page by hand. Right, right. Um, and just going from writing every page by hand to having templates was technology that we had to develop that our engineering team had to develop. And also, I will say that the speed at which we launched stuff was really incredible.

Um, our, our kind of point of reference internally was Microsoft. That was on the other side of the lake in Seattle. And, you know, looking at how long did it take to release something there. And we were releasing things in the matter of, you know, a couple of months. Um, whereas like other kinds of software would take, you know, quite a bit longer to release.

Um, but there's something about it that feels kind of like dog years. It's like, you know, Oh, it was a couple of months, but it felt like it felt like seven years.

Dave Schappell: [00:37:48] Yeah, it was really, it was really compressed, but I actually got an email today from Greg Linden and he talked about like our loving the four to eight week release cycles, because they're so much faster, but the truth is they're not perfect when they go out they're feature poor versus Microsoft had to put these feature rich things, you know, they would put every.

Bell and whistle in there, but they'd only release it every 18 months or so. And so by going out with like minimum viable feature releases and seeing if it works and then iterating on it, it was, uh, again, something you could do with the, where you started the interview, something you could do with internet software that you couldn't as easily do with CD rom and that's.

Maryam Mohit: [00:38:25] Right, right, right. And that was, that was the beauty of it because you could, you could put the thing out, you could do that brutal triage. You could get the thing in front of customers. And then as the customers told you. What was working, what wasn't working, where the pain points, where you could put your effort into the things that mattered, not the things that didn't matter. Right. So that was beautiful.

Dave Schappell: [00:38:44] So this is a perfect transition then to the five. So V five came in, actually it came the week I started, I think in may 98, I think I was so, uh, so oblivious. I had no idea we had a big launch that week, but, uh, talk about what was in V five and what was different about how we did it.

Maryam Mohit: [00:39:01] Right. So was a very big deal because it was the first time that we were going to sell something other than books. So we were going from just selling books to selling books and music. Right. And I remember actually at the company offsite earlier that year, Jeff made a mindblowing announcement to all of us where he said, um, our mission is to be the world's most authoritative.

Seller of information-based products and all of us, you know, our minds were blown, right? Oh my God, we're going to sell more than books. How is this possible? Um, but it was information-based product. So that would be books, music, and video. Um, at that point, at least. Internally publicly within the company, there wasn't a comp completion yet of toys, consumer electronics tools and everything that came after.

So this was our first splitting of the software, the database, the interface, everything into these two products. And so it was a really foundational piece and we knew we were going to go be going to video after that. And so, um, it was foundational to do that split, right? Like there was a million things in the code that referenced books.

There were, you know, dimensions of, of images that were the S the dimensions of book covers not album covers. Um, there was, you know, our, our systems were based on ISBNs. There was all kinds of things that were books specific. And so this, this, this bifurcation was really important. Now, something that was, um, there were two, two things I'd love to talk about with

One is how we did our mini launch. And the other is the tabs navigation. So the mini launch, we call it, we were very, I mean, it was scary to do this launch. There was so many things, things that could go wrong. And so Kim rock Miller, who was the technical program manager and Jennifer caste, who was the GM of the music launch kind of business side of that, we were kind of figured out like, how do we de-risk this situation?

And one of the ideas that we came up with was to do. A mini launch to a small subset of users. And we had never done that before. And so we were like, well, what are we going to do? Well, how are we going to, um, you know, what's it gonna look like if there's bugs and there's problems and, and, and this could be really bad and, but we need to de-risk it.

So we're trying to juggle all these things. And so what we decided just to call this mini launch, build the store. And so we really enlisted our, our customers in the process. And made them partners with us in building the store and

giving us feedback about like, what was working, what wasn't working, what did they like?

What didn't they like? And so, again, this is us like we did from the first day getting user feedback and incorporating that into the development process.

Dave Schappell: [00:41:59] Do you remember some of the big things that came from that customer feedback or, or, or was a big part of this? Just buying ourselves some time to, uh, to get everything ready.

Maryam Mohit: [00:42:10] Well, let's see.

Dave Schappell: [00:42:11] And also, was it password protected? Was it a unique URL? Like how did, did everybody have the same password? Did they have unique passwords? Like when you, I don't remember any of this. Like I said, like launched four days before I got there.

Maryam Mohit: [00:42:24] Look at this. Hold on. I have. Okay. Okay. This is, this is what we said about build the store.

We said help amazon.com build the best music store on the net. They called it the net, oh my God. The best music store on the net while searching for and buying CDs, customers will be able to provide customer reviews, suggestions, information about music, preferences, interests, interests, et cetera. Um, so then we have to have a bunch of stuff about how we were explaining it to people.

Um, let's see. Oh. And then we were giving people rewards for. Um, giving us ideas about how to improve the music store. So we said the best idea of the week we'll win a CD. There'll be a random selection to win a trip, to see a concert in New York or LA. And we also had some music paraphernalia prizes like Jimmy Hendrix's guitar.

I dunno. I dunno if we actually have that right. Our ideas. So, um, we sent emails to customers who had previously bought music for us. From us, we did

have some music titles in our catalog, but it just didn't with everything else. So we sent emails to the customers who had previously bought music from us to expressly invite them to help us build the store.

Um, and we also told people about it by a packing slip blurb in the orders that we were shipping out, inviting them to the URL to help us build a store.

Dave Schappell: [00:43:50] And that was at the time that was at the time where somebody could just print off 5,000 inserts and go down there and stand there and put them in boxes.

Maryam Mohit: [00:43:57] Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So, um, let me just see if I have anything else interesting about that. Um, yeah.

Dave Schappell: [00:44:05] Do you remember any specific feedback that somebody came back with that was like a Eureka moment? Like, oh my God, I can't believe we didn't think of that. Or did it help us deprioritize some things that really we were trying to get in, but didn't seem to be a big problem.

Maryam Mohit: [00:44:20] Well, I don't know whether we had decided it before the mini launch or not, but you, you probably remember that, like we had to decide that classical music was not going to go out with the launch. Yeah. But that's, that's a pretty big decision. So, um, but I D I will show you, this is the customer feedback that we got.

I'm showing you here, a picture of this printed out from, um, the kinds of things that people were saying, and we read every single piece of feedback. And I don't have the, like, um, the, you know, how, how we categorize that feedback and what we did with it, but we absolutely used it.

Dave Schappell: [00:44:59] So, so we've and I had the date. So external beta was May 14th of 98, but then launch was supposed to be May 22nd, only 12 days later, but it actually went, we launched in June.

Maryam Mohit: [00:45:11] Yeah. And I just wanted to show you one thing about, um, About that launch and the launch dates, you know, we were developing at the same time that we were developing the website and that we were developing the technology and that we were developing the customer experience.

We were also developing the processes about how to launch things, right. And so, um, the idea of coming up with dates and estimating how long it was going to take and committing to things so that we could have an external launch of the build, the store and then the press press. Um, launches, that was all kind of new.

And so Kim and I try to get all of us to really commit to those dates and we didn't have any real software to do it, but we had our meeting maker software where we were printed out and we would write down in pen what the different milestones were on the calendar and handed out to everybody. And then we had people sign.

And actually sign in blood actual blood on this piece of paper of assigning our calendar for our launch date.

Dave Schappell: [00:46:16] So funny. I see. Well, I see Susan Benson and Kim rock Miller. I may have seen a Jeff Holden. I'm not sure if he was there at the time, but, uh, that's awesome. Um, I won't ask about where, how the blood was, uh, was, was, uh, collected, but that's.

Maryam Mohit: [00:46:29] Yeah, I think there was some finger pricks and some than thumbprints and that kind of thing going on, but that just like shows the kind of.

Dave Schappell: [00:46:38] So, and that's awesome. So tell me, there was so basically the big thing was not just the external beta getting it out, but we also kind of knew that we had other products coming later in the year, which was video. And we don't have to get into the video DVD and holiday store sort of happened right before the end of the year.

But. As part of , uh that's when we introduced tabs for the first time. Right. And maybe it's to explain the difference between tabs and checklists and why it was sort of a big deal. I'll look at those cute tabs.

Maryam Mohit: [00:47:05] Yeah. So, so, you know, we had a lot of conversations about what kind of navigation we were going to use for this new multiproduct store that we were building before.

The navigation that was at the top was as you can imagine, book centric. So let's see, we had, um, Where is it over here? We had, you know, search browse subjects, bestsellers recommendation center, gift center, award winner, reviewed in the media and shopping cart. Those were the things across the top, in our, in our navigation.

But now what were we going to do? We were going to have browse subjects and then that was going to go to a book browse and a music prize. Fellers was going to go to book bestsellers music for the best sellers. How is this going to work? Even the concept of this is going to be a separate store. And you're going to choose at the top level between books and music.

That was an idea that we had to come up with. And then once we kind of settled on that idea, then there was the question of how, what was that going to look like? Like how we're just gonna understand that. And so, um, there, it was actually really controversial and there was a lot of battling over this navigation and there were some really beautiful designs that were created that were, that were really visually appealing.

Um, but very difficult to execute in HTML 1.0, right. It's impossible. And, and also not necessarily super, super crystal clear to users. And so I think it was Josh Peterson who came up with this idea of using a file folder metaphor from, I'm not sure where he got it. I think he was probably just looking at his file cabinet, um, and using this file metaphor.

Um, As the navigation and that's sort of how we came up with this idea of having a books tab and a music tab, and then thought, okay, you can, we can

then expand this to video and maybe a couple of other things. Now, of course, at that time we didn't realize how many, many other things we were going to do.

And the tab, you know, um, ran up against the limits of the screen size.

Dave Schappell: [00:49:09] Yeah. At some point we had like two or three levels of tabs. It was totally absurd. And there were parodies of it outside the company, but.

Maryam Mohit: [00:49:16] Yes.

Dave Schappell: [00:49:17] But it isn't. I mean, for entrepreneurs like this, these are very, very common problems. When you venture out of your first category and suddenly you realize everything changes, you know, like when you're searching for the partner, what are search results?

Like it has to be music and video somehow. And what seems simple, it gets really complicated quickly because there are unexpected word combinations that, you know, conflict across the catalog. So it was lots of, lots of complications. It was, it was definitely.

Maryam Mohit: [00:49:46] And you can see by that time, you know, then we had our keyword search and then you could choose with radio buttons, books, or music, full search books or music.

We had to create that bifurcation, like all the way through the experience and then bring it back together again in the shopping cart.

Dave Schappell: [00:50:01] Yeah. Well, yeah, very complicated. And we're at, we're at about 50 minutes. So we're going to have to start to wrap, but like maybe mentioned. So V6 then sort of wrapping out 1998.

Maryam Mohit: [00:50:11] V6 video and holiday gift center. And I think the things that, to me, I mean, you can have more in-depth conversations with Jason Kyler, who the GM of the video store and Eugene Wei, who I'm sure has a lot of really articulate things to say about it. Um, but two of the things that, that stand out for me was that.

V6 took a lot less time to do than be five. Right? So some of that work to think about contemplate multiple categories, um, and then it really kind of sunk into for me, at least that, wow, we're going to have to get really good at doing this over and over again and doing it fast and making it more decentralized.

Um, because we were always struggling with bottlenecks bottlenecks and you know, how are we going to decentralize and let these different. Product teams, um, for music, for video, for, and it became toys, electronics tools, how are you, you know, let them operate independently. And that, um, that, that tension between centralization and decentralization and moving fast and keeping things consistent, um, really he was, was a dialectic that we kind of, um, went back and forth.

Uh, between those poles, uh, over the, over the next couple of years. So in, in different ways, both in our organizational structure, like where we're going to have site development, where all the web developers are going to be in one group, where are they going to be? Each to each product line was going to have its own group.

You know, w what did that mean for collegiality among people who shared a skillset versus, um, Uh, tight functioning and being close to the customer in a product line. It also, um, led to questions about design and UI and UX. You know, how do we, we had, we tried to create, I have some documentation where Helen Owens, the design director and Jess Peterson, and I were working on design principles that could be used in a decentralized manner.

So that's our org chart. Wouldn't show on our website, right. Because the customers. Wouldn't want things to work differently in the video store, from in the bookstore. Yeah. Um, yeah.

Dave Schappell: [00:52:19] So overarching principles of like, it has to fit within this. Cause I, I remember even back then every store would kind of have to pick a color because the nav, you know, would change for that store.

And, um, Yeah, it was, again, it's very, it's common problems like that. Centralized, decentralized things. As people as companies grow, I was at a board meeting last Thursday and we were talking I'm like, this is deja VU because we're talking about the same thing from 25 years ago, but in a, you know, a new context.

So, um, so yeah, so, so stepping back, uh, they say two more affordable step back, of course.

Maryam Mohit: [00:52:53] Yeah. Sorry. Um, about this design standards. You know, we were, we were talking about colors, browser, compatibility, fonts, headings, um, you know, services that needed to work across all products. Like for example, um, let's see, for example, we were talking about, um, uh, tone, voice, um, things that had to work across all things like log on passwords.

Um, you know, all of these different kinds of things that we had to specify, where could things be unique and different in a product line and where did they need to work across, across the board. And then also, I just, the other thing I wanted to mention was I did finally find this, um, document with all of Jeff's comments on the early feedback that we got.

And he was talking about things like. Um, we really want the site to be fun. And he's saying that, you know, we want to make sure to get email addresses because we collected phone numbers then. And so, you know, and email. So like we need to collect the emails and the phone numbers, because if the email bounces, we need a way to contact the customer.

If we have a problem with their order, you know, Yeah. And that's a lot of penny, massive attention to detail.

Dave Schappell: [00:54:06] Yeah. It's funny how the email problem has still never gone away. We're still still wrestling with changing emails. So when you step back from all the detail, like, what do you, and you've, you've said some of this already, but what do you think about the macro topics applying to sort of.

Site development really? You owned user experience. I mean, I know everybody owned it and that's one thing, but like your teams owned, getting that user experience. Right. And from the beginning of this talk, it was about making the website interactive, you know? And so what do you take as the sort of takeaways that you probably talk with entrepreneurs about all the time?

Maryam Mohit: [00:54:45] I think one of the things that I talk, I do talk to entrepreneurs about, and actually I still do in my work is. As I said before, really going out and, and listening to customers in their own voices, in their own words to see that they write into customer service in all caps, because they're that right.

You know, to, um, he, well, the urgency of the pain that they're feeling about something. And then to work in a multidisciplinary way with engineering, with design, with. Writing to come up with these innovative solutions. To me, that's the big takeaway about everything that we, that we did was trying to innovate on the behalf of customers.

And I think that, you know, that's one theme and the other theme is that, is that sense of, of ownership, you know, signing in blood, on our schedules. Like that's because like we, for whatever reason, we all really, really cared about getting it right. Yeah, we heard about things like typos on the website we cared about, you know, was it going to take people longer to do this, were going to be saving them time?

I think that the people I worked with at Amazon were not only incredibly smart and hard working, but, you know, and we have a reputation of having like a kind of hard-edged culture, but I think it was really in the service of delivering

for people and making their lives better. And feeling ownership that like, no, one's good.

No, one's sat around to wait for someone to tell them to do something.

Dave Schappell: [00:56:24] Yeah. And I also think about, like, there was a tremendous sense of pride in, in innovation. You know, like listening to the customer, but then coming up with a solution that, that probably customer couldn't have anticipated, like the work that Greg Linden who mentioned, and the personalization team and search teams, like all these things, it was kind of magic, you know, back then.

And so it's one thing to listen, but then there's the part where you got to take that and turn it into something magical that gets people excited.

Maryam Mohit: [00:56:53] Yeah. And that's, and that's the real trick. And I mean, I do think that it, you know, Jeff's Jeff Faiza set a great example of boldness. You know, he just really, he was just really unafraid about a lot of things.

Dave Schappell: [00:57:05] Yeah. Well that got us to 1998. We have four more years, so I hope you will, uh, consider coming back in a few weeks. And, um, and we do some, some future launches. It's really. I'll just say, thank you so much for being my guests, uh, on the, on the podcast.

Maryam Mohit: [00:57:24] It's a pleasure. I really, I, I have three wonderful children. I feel like in a lot of ways I used to say Amazon was my first child. Right. It felt like, yeah.

Dave Schappell: [00:57:36] And, uh, yeah, it's so funny too, because I mean, I've visibly remember your office in the corner there in the Columbia building. And, you know, everybody was sort of around that corner with David Richard there and Andy and Jason.

And so I think people are going to love hearing these stories. Like they really are equally applicable to. An experience on Airbnb today, or, you know, or next door where you work now for the record, for the record, I sent Merriam feedback about next door a couple of days ago. I'm like, this is unacceptable.

I can't believe this works this way. And I knew she would pass it right onto the product team.

Maryam Mohit: [00:58:07] Absolutely. And absolutely. And actually, you know, in my work at next door, I do, I do user research and I talk to users all day long and I love it.

Dave Schappell: [00:58:17] Yeah. Well, yeah, like I said, I think the stories about how your team actually actually use customer feedback and actually iterate and then follow that all the way through to the postmortems was a really big reason over that multi-year period that we really did not.

Iterate and innovate so quickly, but that we improve the processes. He's maybe the boring behind the scene processes to make it repeatable. So I think every startup can learn a ton from that. And usual, it was great to see you. It's been too long, so yeah for the audience, thank you for listening to the event, like an owner podcast.

If you'd like more details about what we discussed today and by the way, Mary might want to get copies of all that stuff or screenshots or whatever. I think it'll be great on the post. You know, so, or if you want, you have edits or suggestions for topics, please reach out visit [invent like an owner.com](http://inventlikeanowner.com) to sign up for the weekly newsletter.

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