This Successful Ecommerce Entrepreneur Explains How to Tell The Difference Between Urgent and Important

Zulily co-founder Darrell Cavens says that he turns off notifications but keeps his door open, to be at his best problem-solving mindset

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A Note From The Editor

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Editor's Note: Entrepreneur's "20 Questions" series features both established and up-and-coming entrepreneurs and asks them a number of questions about what makes them tick, their everyday success strategies and advice for aspiring founders.

How do you turn customers into devoted fans? As the co-founder of ecommerce retailer Zulily, Darrell Cavens has worked to make sure that every transaction ends when the user has found something completely unique.

For the unfamiliar, the site, which turned 8 this year offers sales of up to 70 percent off on brands ranging from LEGO to Vera Bradley every morning at 6:00 am PST. In 2013, the company went public, and two years later, it was bought by QVC

for a deal worth $2.4 billion. (Cavens now serves as the president of new ventures at QVC.)

As of the start of 2018, Zulily had a 90 percent customer return rate and a base of 5.3 million active customers.

Prior to launching Zulily, Cavens was the CTO of Blue Nile, a Seattle-based online jewelry platform, and he currently sits on the board of Deliveroo.

After the acquisition, Cavens now serves as president of new ventures at QVC. In this role, Cavens is looking for the next big retail success, overseeing a team that is constantly on the search for new partnerships and potential acquisitions to join Zulily under the QVC umbrella.

We caught up with Cavens to ask him 20 Questions and ask him what makes him tick.

1. How do you start your day?
I go to the gym three days a week, [because] I feel so refreshed when I workout and then come into the office. Other mornings, I'll go meet with an entrepreneur and talk [to them] about their business.

2. How do you end your day?
I'll head home and try not to work in the evenings. A couple of years ago, I had one of my team members tell me I was sending a lot of email during the evening and [it was stressing her out]. It was one of those moments where I realized I was doing it because it was convenient for me, but that I was causing stress and anxiety for them, because they felt like they had to respond to it. So now try to fit those communications in during the day and not make the team feel like they have to be always on.

3. What's a book that changed your mind and why?
Different by Youngme Moon, who is a teacher at the Harvard Business School. The book is about approaching problems

differently. A lot of people think their ideas are different, but a lot of the challenge of new businesses is thinking about a problem in a different way.

4. What's a book you always recommend and why?
Every time we hire a new executive at Zulily I buy them a copy of Sam Walton's book *Made in America*. It's the story of the early WalMart days. Folks look at WalMart and think of it as a large company, but the book is a story of building that business one store at a time, one person at a time. I like the approach he took about taking folks that were not viewed as qualified for roles and giving them a stretch opportunity.

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5. What's a strategy to keep focused?
I turn off all notifications so I can focus. I try to be focused on what I'm doing, but I would say I have an open-door policy and I get interrupted a lot. But I view it as valuable if I can help the team solve their problems or help them think through a problem.

6. When you were a kid what did you want to be when you grew up?
My dad was an engineer, so we were always building things. We grew up on a small hobby farm, so whether it was building a fence, a barn or chopping wood, it was always about using your time effectively to get things done. As a kid, I always wanted to see the practical side of what I was doing. I was never a big fan of the theory behind things so much as driving to get things done.

7. What did you learn from the worst boss you ever had?
Of all my employee reviews over the years, there's only one I can ever remember. My boss at the time, pulled me into his office and said, "I just have one piece of advice for you: You need to shut up and listen more."

It was one of those moments that it kind of smacks you in the head and you're like I can't believe you just said that. I came to realize that I had this tendency to talk over people and not listen to what they were saying. It's probably one of the pieces of advice that's changed my life more than anything. [It's so important to] sit back and listen to other people and not think you know everything.

8. Who has influenced you most when it comes to how you approach your work?
My co-founder Mark Vadon at Zulily. Over the eight years [I worked with him at former company] Blue Nile I probably quit on him three or four times. Every time he talked me out of it and convinced me to take on a different job. I remember when he gave me the marketing team. I looked across at him and I was like, "but I don't know anything about marketing." He kind of laughed at me and said, "you're smart and you'll figure it out." He had so much influence in giving me opportunities to stretch beyond what I thought I was able to do.

9. What's a trip that changed you?
In 2007 Mark and I flew out to Pennsylvania and had a day touring QVC and learning about the business. I was blown away by the scale of the business, the approach to storytelling, the product and customer passion. And now, after starting Zulily and selling the business to QVC and taking on a role within QVC to run this new ventures division, that was an amazing bit of fate to do that back then and then to be here now.

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10. What inspires you?
I work to learn. I love to think of new ideas and new approaches to problems. I think that you can do just about anything if you set your mind to it, so what gets me excited every day is a problem that is a challenge to solve.

11. What was your first business idea and what did you do with it?

I was a competitive canoe racer in high school. As we started training more, my dad said we should look into seeing if there was a way to build a clubhouse. Being the engineer that he is, he was able to get a grant and led a project to build us a clubhouse. Once we did that, I started a canoe and kayak camp and ran it for a number of years.

12. What was an early job that taught you something important or useful?

I was a consultant at a early internet company in 1993. The [team] asked me to teach a class in this programming language, even though I didn't actually know [it]. I remember walking in being terrified to teach this class, and then came to realize I only needed to be a couple chapters ahead of the students. It was intimidating and scary, but it's a lesson that if you can get confidence around what you do know and be vulnerable about what you don't, you can sell your way through it.

13. What's the best advice you ever took?

My old boss telling me to shut up [and listen]. I tend to think out loud, so the way that I get new, fresh ideas is talking, but I realize that can overwhelm people if you're not giving them a chance to speak.

14. What's the worst piece of advice you ever got?

Very few things drive me nuts more than someone saying, "well that's just how it is and that's how it's supposed to be done." New ideas come from people challenging the status quo. When I have folks give me advice or guidance to just accept things the way they are, I try to understand why are they saying that. What is the constraint? If there's a better idea out there, let's lean into that.

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15. What's a productivity tip you swear by?
I try not to keep up on my email. I could easily spend six hours a day just doing email, if I let it take over. To be more productive, I focus on what I think is important and not let other people's priorities overtake [mine]. If you're always taking on whatever is inbound from folks, you never move your own agenda forward.

16. Is there an app or tool you use in a surprising way to get things done or stay on track?
WhatsApp for close friends and business associates. LastPass, a password manager is one that has changed how I think about security. I also my Fitbit. I try to beat 14,000 steps a day. Over the last year and a half, I've also become an avid user of MyFitnessPal where I track everything I eat. I have managed to lose 40 plus pounds over the last year.

17. What does work-life balance mean to you?
It's changed a lot over the years. I think when we started Zulily there was work with no balance. I was always on. I'd get up early and work late. I did that for probably the first four years of the business and realized it took a toll on me. Over the last four or five years, I stopped working on Saturday. And then about two years ago I stopped working on Sundays as well. I feel a lot healthier [now].

18. How do you prevent burnout?
Surrounding yourself with great people that can take on big chunks of the work for you. When we started this business there were two of us around the table. Today there are over 3,500 people at Zulily and at QVC 25,000 plus people.

In many ways over the last eight years I've probably had five different jobs. The last few have been about hiring great people, handing things off and getting out of their way. You can scale a lot better with great people around you.

19. When you're faced with a creativity block, what's your

strategy to get innovating?
Get in a room with a couple of folks. I’m not somebody that can sit in a room at a computer screen or with sheet of paper and come up with the idea. If I can get two or three people in the room and can talk through something, that’s when the great ideas come out.

20. What are you learning now?
My new role at QVC is running new ventures. We are looking for businesses to acquire and partner with. I’m learning how to do the side of business development and how to evaluate these businesses at scale. It’s a pretty big mindset shift.

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