

July

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Brandingmag.com
Publication

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Key Lessons from the
World's Boldest Brands

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No. 15

Don't Panic!

July



Don't Panic! is a monthly 1:1 interview series with a fearless leader to discuss the key growth challenges of their brand – and how they've tackled them head on.



There's a new cool kid on the block!

"My window A/C is beautiful and so easy to install", said no one ever. Not until today, that is.

July, an ambitious new startup, set out to disrupt an outdated category by offering people beautifully designed products through a seamless end-to-end CX, betting on the fact that customers want more variety in their search for the perfect appliance.

But, launching a brand during a global pandemic is no easy feat. Dominik Prinz-Barley sat down with founders Erik Rauterkus and Muhammad Saigol to talk about how they overcame some of their biggest challenges – and where they are on their journey of creating the most beloved consumer appliances brand of the 21st century!



Q1 **Going back all the way to the early days: what inspired you to start July?**

We live in New York City, and we've both experienced the "horrors" of a window A/C experience: lugging it home from the store in the back of a yellow cab, carrying it up four flights of stairs, figuring out how to install it, and then trying to overlook the ugly product design each day – it was not pleasant (both laugh)!

Working at Boston Consulting Group together, we had developed new products and business models for many companies, but felt there was an entrepreneurial opportunity here to develop something groundbreaking for ourselves, instead of others.

The idea for July was born. We wanted to build a brand that brings back the pride and excitement people felt for their appliances in the 50s and 60s! A 21st-century consumer appliances brand starting with air conditioners that are beautifully designed, affordable, and offer a seamless customer experience with great service.

It seemed like such a fantastic opportunity to bring innovation to a space that has not seen much change in decades, so we quit our jobs (in July 2019!) and went for it.



“We wanted to build a brand that brings back the pride and excitement people felt for their appliances in the 50s and 60s!”

Q2 What was the biggest challenge you faced in bringing the brand to life?

“We had to get a much better understanding of how people felt about A/Cs, including their biggest pain points and frustrations.”



Analyzing the category, we knew that there was a massive need for product and service innovation in this space. But we had to get a much better understanding of how people felt about A/Cs, including their biggest pain points and frustrations.

So, in the summer of 2019, we did something rather unconventional: we created an experiment that would allow us to fully immerse ourselves in the lives of our (potential) customers.

We bought a container full of A/C units, created a temporary brand, set up a website over a weekend, and launched it with a bit of paid advertising. The reaction was incredible – we sold out in two weeks. Where we could, we installed the units ourselves. We met real customers, learned about their needs and expectations. All that knowledge we gained directly informed July’s product development.

For example, the customization options available in our products stem from our experience with seeing how differently people had styled their apartments and realizing that a one-size-fits-all design simply won’t work. July would not be the brand it is today had we not walked in our customers’ shoes first!

Q3 What bold moves have you made – and which ones took the most courage?



“It took a lot of courage to invest in and launch our brand in very uncertain times...”

As you can imagine, this was a difficult year to launch a brand! We geared up to deliver our units in the summer – and then the pandemic brought the world to a standstill!

It was a critical moment in which we needed to ask ourselves: “Should we proceed, or should we stop?” Many other brands decided to do the latter; they pushed back new product releases, paused all advertising, etc.

Our answer was to keep going. We simply felt that people needed something pleasant to look forward to, like improving their home with a beautiful product.

So, we created a waitlist and promised people we’d deliver as soon as we’d be allowed to enter their homes again. This strategy paid off: we sold 1,000 units in two weeks and created a lot of positive word of mouth.

It took a lot of courage to invest in and launch our brand in very uncertain times, but it gave us the chance to communicate honestly and transparently with our customers.

More importantly, we created something priceless: a great first impression!

Q4 Think 5 years ahead: what is the single most exciting opportunity for July?

Our ambition is to build a leading consumer appliances brand with an ecosystem of products: A/Cs, microwaves, refrigerators, and more. We want to create a brand that people are genuinely excited about and can't wait to have in their homes.

That's why we'll focus on two areas over the next years.

“Our ambition is to build a leading consumer appliances brand with an ecosystem of products...”



First, the product design. We're working on a unified design language that ties together appliances in different living spaces, like the kitchen or living room, to create a cohesive look and feel.

Second, we want to totally redefine the end-to-end service experience. From designing the product to building, selling, delivery, and servicing it, we want to control and deliver seamless and refreshingly pleasant interactions with our customers. This won't just give them total peace of mind, but should hopefully also erase the desire to ever want to bring another appliance brand home!

Q5 What is your advice for other founders who have a great idea and want to shake up an established category?

Our key advice is simple: don't try to boil the ocean!

Often, when entrepreneurs have a great idea, things can quickly start to feel daunting: where do we start, how do we build a website, where do we generate sales, etc. Before you know it, you're in a state of paralysis.

Instead, find a way to isolate what really matters and make sure your core assumptions are right – because if they're not, you're in deep trouble!

Go! Test and validate your core ideas in the real world using quick, efficient experiments – and gain confidence. It's the small wins along the way that end up leading you to the big win!



“Isolate what really matters and make sure your core assumptions are right – because if they're not, you're in deep trouble!”



Co-Founders

Muhammad Saigol and Erik Rauterkus are the co-founders of July, a new entrant on the journey to becoming the 21st-century consumer appliance brand, starting with the stagnant and outdated cooling space.

Leveraging Saigol's in-depth knowledge of manufacturing gained from his family appliance business and both founders' personal frustrations with products in this space, they have set on this disruptive path by reimagining the humble window air conditioner for the modern consumer.

Saigol and Rauterkus met while colleagues at Boston Consulting Group's Digital Ventures, where they gained repetitions in launching innovative new businesses in a variety of different industries from MedTech to elder care.

With July, Saigol and Rauterkus are uniquely combining innovation in product with innovation in service to launch the most beautiful window A/C ever with an experience that will delight and surprise.



Dominik Prinz-Barley

Dominik is a regular contributor to Brandingmag.

He is a firm believer that the integration of business and purpose is key to meaningful change. He has become a widely recognized and published thought leader on the topic and is a strategic advisor to some of the world's most renowned brands, Fortune 500 companies, and C-Suite leaders.

After holding leadership positions in global brand strategy and marketing consultancies, he is currently a Partner at NYC-based boutique management consultancy cg42.

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