

EPIISODE 069

TOP OF THE MORNIN' COFFEE

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Stephen McDavid, Earthling Studio

AND

Hugh Thomas, Top of the Mornin' Coffee

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO

Hi, this is Bryony Gomez-Palacio and welcome to episode number 69 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Top of The Morning Coffee, a brand of specialty coffee created by the hugely popular Youtuber, Seán McLoughlin aka Jacksepticeye. Seán has amassed more than 52 million followers across social media – with 29M subscribers and nearly 16 billion views on YouTube alone — where he produces content around videogames, reacting to tik toks, meme reviews, and more. The coffee brand is named after his opening line for all his YouTube videos, “Top of the Mornin’!”, in his signature Irish lilt. Sourced ethically and made with USDA-certified-organic, specialty-grade beans, its four different roasts are available ground or in whole beans and as single purchase or subscription exclusively through their website. Now available too are tea and hot chocolate products as well as, naturally, plenty of merch with 1% of sales going to Crisis Text Line.

The project, designed by London, UK-based Earthling Studio, was posted on Brand New on March 22, 2023. You can pull it up

on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast069 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast069, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Stephen McDavid, Creative Partner and Founder of Earthling Studio; and Hugh Thomas, CEO of Top of the Mornin' Coffee.

In this conversation we hear about the undeniable impact of Jacksepticeye's personality on the brand and how that was translated into the brand idea of "absurdly positive" that drove most creative decisions. Being a creator-lead brand, it would have been easy to just plaster Jacksepticeye's contagiously happy face all over the identity but instead they made sure the brand could live, long-term, without relying only on him. We learn about the origin of the cup of sunshine logo, how the crew of characters came to be, the challenges of the packaging, and how much joy went into the project. In fact, you can drink a shot — of coffee — every time the word "joy" is used in this episode.

Now, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Stephen and Hugh.

ARMIN VIT Hello everyone, today we're here to talk about coffee. And if it's the dead of night, or the sun is not shining where you are, you are about to get a full serving of sunshine, joy, and feel good vibes, as we get into the redesign of Top of the Mornin' Coffee.

Stephen, Hugh, welcome to The Follow-Up.

HUGH THOMAS Thanks for having us.

HUGH Hey, Armin. Thank you.

ARMIN So that our listeners can know who's who, if you can introduce yourselves with your name and title.

STEPHEN MCDAVID Hey guys, I'm Stephen Creative Partner and Co-founder at Earthling Studio.

HUGH So I'm Hugh, I'm the CEO of Top of the Mornin' Coffee working with our founder Jacksepticeye or Seán who's a YouTube creator, entertainer, philanthropist, you name it, Seán does it. He started his brand in 2020 and I joined the business last year to take it to the next stage which we've been working with Steve and team on.

ARMIN Can you tell us a little bit about the history of the brand, how that first phase of its existence fared in the market, and what attracted you to join the company?

HUGH It's a very interesting story. So you have Seán or Jacksepticeye who is the founder of the business. Seán is one of the OG YouTube creators, but an entertainer in general across pretty much every form of media you can imagine. Seán has been creating content for over a decade at this point—his channel is a decade old. He has over 50 million social media followers across the different platforms and nearly 30 million YouTube subscribers. And he's been delivering uplifting, fun, entertaining content for the last decade. A lot of it built around gaming but also just having fun, and his audience really relates with the way Seán authentically communicates with them. It's uplifting when you go and log on and watch his channel. You're escaping from the day-to-day, and just watching someone as entertaining as him have fun and engage with his community. Seán is Irish, lives in the UK but has big following around the world, and one of his passions is bean coffee and the world around coffee.

When you start your day with a cup of coffee, it's for many people including him, the first thing you do_sets you up for the day. And again, as we all know, it's uplifting and whether your experience is tea, coffee, hot chocolate, that kind of first beverage moment, that way to start the day was something he's passionate about. And so in 2020 he had the foresight and genius to lock in the brand name Top of the Mornin', which is a phrase that he uses to start pretty much all of his YouTube videos, is how he greets people. Obviously a well known phrase from his homeland as well. And so you can imagine when you

link Top of the Mornin' with coffee, it makes a lot of sense and he was very early on I think in terms of creator brands, which is a big part of the conversation at the moment and decided to launch the brand in June, 2020.

Obviously a lot of us were at home changing our routines, buying coffee at home maybe instead of going to the coffee shop cuz we couldn't, wherever we were in the world, for obvious reasons. And the brand had an amazing launch working with the partners that it worked on. And for the last 18 months it's been a very lean organization building, growing and I think what Seán identified was that he wanted the brand to feel more like him, wanted to evolve. It felt like it had engaged incredibly well with the consumer. And that's when I started talking to the team there with my background in terms of consumer products and building consumer brands, wanted to work with him to take this amazing initial start that the business had, and taking it to the next level, which for us is taking coffee to consumers that maybe find the current branding of coffee unapproachable, and a little bit snobby.

And so we started conversations and really felt that where the brand was, which you can find online and look up was not where it needed to go. I joined the team to re-look at everything from what products we sold, how the website worked, and in particular in due to this conversation, how it looked and felt in the world. So really that kind of teaser up to where I joined last Spring and kind of an amazing foundation that it had been built on with tens of thousands of consumers buying the coffee, but so much potential ahead to take this to a new audience as well.

ARMIN Fantastic. No further questions on this line of questioning that was very well put. So Stephen, I know a little bit about the connections that help spark this collaboration, but for our listeners—and so I can get the full scoop myself—how did Earthling get involved in this project, especially considering that you have just started your studio?

HUGH Hugh and I crossed paths in a past life working on Ugly drinks where I was leading the team creatively to take the brand identity to the next level. Hugh and I have really clicked on that project and stayed in touch ever since really. And then, I guess when this project came along it was a bit of a dream first project to be honest with you. And I think that kind of connection and collaboration between the two of us, and with Jack and the team, has been great.

ARMIN Both a blessing and a curse to have such a great project, as his first one because now the expectation is that you need to deliver at this level of joy, creativity, and goodness from here on forward. But no pressure!

HUGH <laugh>. Thank you.

HUGH No pressure Steve.

HUGH <laugh>

ARMIN Hugh, as you started this conversation with Earthling, what were some of the initial goals and ambitions you shared with them to get them started on the project, and also for context, was there someone else involved in your side as part of the team? or were you flying solo for the most part on this project?

HUGH You know, when we first looked at this, obviously I wanted to take a wide view of partners that we could work with to bring the brand to life. I always would and obviously had the connection with Steve, but with this project we obviously had the ability to work with design agencies or partners anywhere in the world given it's a pretty remote organization. And as much as a dream project for me or Steve, a dream project for lots of people out there. What we were looking for and I say we, it's obviously Seán or Jacksepticeye who is our founder, and wanting to deliver what his vision was. We wanted something that really had soul, and really spoke to the way that Seán and also the team around felt that we wanted the brand to be seen in the world and also the way we see the world.

We spoke to some amazing branding agencies and there's some amazing partners in the world right now. I think the standard of creativity makes me happy every day to see what people come up with. But I think in particular for this, you wanted almost to see and feel the warmth, and feel the joy, and be uplifted the same ways when you have the beverage. We wanted it to feel the same way when you see it sat in the cupboard, or on the shelf, or when you're wearing the cap like I am now. And obviously when you are seeing the brand now you can kind of see that come to life, but at the beginning it's a blank piece of paper and I felt that knowing Steve's work from the past, and seeing the work of other agencies—I still think we could have come some amazing results—but I don't think we would've quite got the colorful, iconic, bright personality that we've delivered with this work, which is Jacksepticeye visualized, but also a brand that can extend long-term beyond just being Seán's coffee brand.

And that was really important for us. That's kind of how we identified it. We looked at lots of different work, showed a lot to Seán, what did he like, what didn't he like, what was he looking for? And eventually he selected the partner that we worked with. I kind of showed him who we could work with, what the work was, and how it could bring his vision to life. And then we had the first kickoff session in real life, which not every meeting for the last couple of years has been with Seán, and Earthling, and myself in person, which I think was the kickoff for this work.

ARMIN Speaking of the kickoff, Stephen, what in these initial conversations stood out for you? And you know, from what Hugh said, there's so much to pick up on and that clearly found its way into the eventual design approach, but what stood out initially from these conversations early on?

HUGH I think as Hugh was alluding to there, spending time, we took the train down to Brighton and spent time with Jacksepticeye himself. And I think a brief point of view, kind of Hugh and Jack were very clear to

create this kind of standalone coffee brand that would embody Jack's personality but could stand on its own two feet. From meeting Jack and spending that time with him, his personality and his irreverent humor and his absolute positivity really stood out as something in terms of trying to boil down his spirit and then take that into Top of the Mornin' became very clear, and I guess this idea of the conversations we had, the stimulus we put in front of him, very much listening to him in terms of what his passion was for coffee, why he wanted to undergo this redesign. One of the little sound bites he gave away when we were down there, which kind of I very much clung onto was he talked about this idea of coffee as like a cup of sunshine. So that was very, very early on in the process and that very much stuck in my head. And obviously now you can see that in the work. Very important to spend the time with founders like that and kind of very much listen to the ambition.

ARMIN Yeah and I think, as you mentioned Hugh, it's nice that these meetings are not happening in person. You know we started this podcast, the beginning of the pandemic and all the stories were about how meetings happened through Zoom and Google Teams, whatever, but it's now nice to hear about how important these in-person meetings are and how you can pick up on certain things that you just can't quite on a digital conversation. That's just a nice aside of everybody as a global community evolving from this pandemic getting sidetracked a little bit before we get into the design. This is a question for you Hugh, about this particular market of content creators launching products and businesses. You've been involved with more traditional retailer brands like Ugly Drinks as you mentioned, which you were CEO of, so I guess the question is: what are some differences or similarities between a product launch by an independent content creator and a traditional consumer brand manufacturer?

HUGH It's a really interesting space right now as you outlined so well there. Previously, the way a brand has been built, and there are still many brands doing a great job of it, is you build the brand and then try and

build the audience. Whereas the model flips when you work with a creator with a bigger audience as Seán, where you have the audience and you create a product and have that ready made distribution. Where the challenge is for a lot of creator-led brands is that I think you need to have a long-term view on what you're building. And again, I can't speak for every creative brand that's existed or has been around, but the best brands are the ones that look long-term and they look beyond just being a short-term sales opportunity, selling t-shirts or coffee, and then closing the website after six months when you've made enough profit.

For this project we wanted to build a brand that can be around 50, a hundred-plus years; and I think that's where all great design and brand building starts. It's starting with that mentality that you want it to be something that is timeless and engages. And for us when it comes to creator brands, and from my point of view, is that you need to consider what the brand means with or without the creator as part of it. And I know Steve just outlined part of that, but you also have this incredible opportunity to engage with such a big audience on day one, which makes it particularly unique. We knew we'd be putting it out there and I think the challenge for us is continuing to grow with Seán and Jacksepticeye's audience and continuing to make what his audience is looking for. But additionally expanding beyond that, and making this a product that can be a household brand in whatever format, whether it's coffee, or tea, or other products that we have coming in the future.

What Steve said there is almost taking Jack's personality, and his values, and his positivity, and encapsulating that means that he is in the DNA of the brand and vice versa. But what we haven't done is plaster his face on the front of the bag and said it's Jacksepticeye coffee. Which I think is a short-term plan driving revenue within an audience, but if you really wanna build a brand for the long term, it still needs all the fundamentals of well-run business, good economics,

well-managed team, and a clear vision that delivers on that. Hopefully we're putting those building blocks in place obviously with the business model but also with the branding that we've done with Steve and team.

ARMIN Fantastic Insight. Makes me think that maybe Brand New and with our great audience we're ready for a coffee brand of our own. So stay tuned... <laugh> perhaps in the near future .<laugh> Back to our regularly scheduled content of design conversation: Stephen, what was the first run of design exploration for Earthling like, and what did you present to the Top of the Mornin' Coffee team?

HUGH We landed on the kind of brand idea of “absurdly positive”, which was the catalyst of all of the creative going forward. And that was very much born from Seán's, quite absurd sense of humor, if you're familiar with his content. And then on the other side of that, how positive he is. Like we said, very much born from his DNA— balled down into this “absurdly positive” which has a brand idea very much inspired the copywriters, designers, et cetera. And in the first instance in terms of sharing creative, the first thing we did is we shared two creative territories, which is very much verbal and a kind of visual exercise. And then we also had some very early sketches included in that work. And the two spaces from memory, the first one was very much about owning the morning. So this idea of the start of the day, which sounds obvious now, but the idea of it's called Top of the Mornin', this idea of very much owning that kind of start of the day, and then the second territory was about building a world for the brand to live in. So almost building a place, building a space you could almost immerse yourself in.

And the kind of outcome of those two spaces was a classic: we like both. We'd love the idea of owning the morning, Hugh was very passionate about that thought and I think we were both slightly taken back by how nobody had really lent into that in coffee. Owning the morning, especially for a founder that it's so kind of positive, felt like a no-brainer. From a creative territory point of view was very much

taking the best of both, smashing them together. From a kind of, you know, mood board territory, sketch territory point of view it became clear very quickly, Jacks/Seán is very visually literate, he was very clear on what he liked, what he didn't like and also able to articulate why he liked it, which was amazing to work with somebody who's obviously very creative but can articulate what he likes from a design aesthetic point of view.

And from there we took the idea of "absurdly positive" and what we did was we created four creative routes, four ways in to bring it to life. Looking to stretch how far we could go with it from routes that felt a little bit closer in, a little bit more of an evolution, all the way out to stuff that was a bit braver and pushing what was possible. Each of those territories testing out, do we own a brand color? testing the tone of voice, you know, how does the tone of voice start to come to life? Do we have illustration? Does Jack actually live in the brand? Does he not live in the brand? And then starting to test that on packaging, website, social, et cetera, just to try and create some stimulus that Hugh and the team, and Jack and the team, could start to feedback in kind of terms of what felt right for them, and right for the business, and right for his community as well.

And the only thing I'd add to that is look, normally we wouldn't show four routes, honestly, maybe we'd showed two or three, but it was such a rich territory, kind of rich space and rich brand idea. We couldn't take a route out at the last minute. They were all so strong. And then I think there was actually from that process, the best bits were taken, pulled together into this kind of super route. Which I'm personally fine with, I know some people have problems with that, but I think from my point of view, that's how you get to the best work.

ARMIN Going back to the many conversations we've had on this podcast, there's many more instances where bits and pieces are put together from various routes, as opposed to this hardheaded approach that designers used to have before we're like A, B, or C, choose one, do

not dare combine the three because it'll be over for our careers. It's nice that there's now more openness from designers, of listening to the client, because usually they don't have to have that hard choice between A, B or C, or A ,or B, or in this case A, B, C or d. Hugh, what stood out to you in this initial round? Perhaps something that did make it to the final round, something that you liked but didn't quite see working? Just in general, what was your impression of this first for visual explorations.

HUGH The team at Earthling spent a lot of time listening to Seán at the beginning. I think that was invaluable of that in-person time spent together absorbing the energy in the room, listening, understanding how it all started and then almost hearing like a view on the world and values versus saying we want a brand that looks like this brand, or we want work that looks like this. I don't think we ever had that moment when it came to the brief. It was we want this to embody this value, this attitude, and therefore I think a lot of the work that we were shown and the routes we were shown was essentially just totally original. You wouldn't say it's inspired by this, or looks like this brand, and hopefully that's what we've achieved in the end result too is something that is standalone, standout, iconic, doesn't borrow from brand X or Y, doesn't have references to other categories.

It is a visual embodiment of the vision and the values of the founder and the team at the time. So those routes we were presented, and the reason I feel like we were able to merge them together, they were all original and they all had original ideas that were able to combine together versus saying we've got one that's in this style and another that's in this style. I don't think that's how the work looked. I feel like it was all unique and so we were taking references... they all came from, again, this same "absurdly positive" idea. Having that running through everything from day one as Steve said, meant that these ideas weren't a million miles away. They're almost related in some sense. We weren't just picking and choosing from the buffet, I want a slice of

chocolate cake on with my sandwiches. It was more in line, and I feel like that worked really well.

But it came from that really clear time spent listening and working with Seán, understand what he wanted to put into the world. I feel like that's really hard to do. The listening, and also listening to the feedback as we went along is so important to really listen and hear where someone is coming from. From my point of view to create brands with that soul. If you want to have that soul, you have to listen and that's what the team at Earthling did so well, which is why I think everyone's so happy with the work because it's the visual embodiment of those feelings, versus <laugh>, I sound so pretentious saying this, but we weren't trying to pigeonhole something, we weren't trying to create Uber off X or we want the Airbnb for Y. This is original in the sense of the visual aesthetic.

ARMIN I think that you have all the right to make that statement without sounding pretentious. I think there is something unique and joyful about it that doesn't try to mimic something that exists. I mean it looks like stuff we've seen, it draws from cartoons, it draws from mascots of yester-year, whatever it is. But when you put it together in this new quote-unquote package, it just does come across as something freshly brewed just for this audience. So I'll stop with my bad puns <laugh> and now continue on to more design stuff. Stephen, how did the logo evolve? Was the final design close to something that you presented in those first rounds? How did you arrive at the final composition, the animation, all of that good stuff about the logo?

HUGH From a logo point of view, we were quite close in the early stage, so the idea of the cup of sunshine. We didn't know he was called Sunny at that point, he was nameless, but we were quite close I'd say in the first stage... or an iteration of it, a rough version of it. I think one of the things that stuck out for me and again that conversation with Seán and Hugh was this idea of developing a brand, developing an icon that could work as well as in YouTube thumbnail, as it could work on

store and have that same kind of impact at small size and obviously in traditional retail. And then the second part to it in terms of his brief, Seán is very much after something that anyone could draw.

And those two things really stuck out in my head, one he wanted his community to be able to draw this very easily—so it needs to be super simple. And he wanted it to work in the smallest screen size and then blown up big also. That kind of gave us our brief, and then the work that I've done in the past, and the work that I'm very passionate about is creating very memorable assets. Creating assets, when you think of that brand, you think of that asset. Or you think of that color palette, or you think of that you know particularly type treatment. From a typographic point of view, if you've seen any of Jacksepticeye's videos, the way he starts his videos with that very infectious Top of the Mornin' energy, that really favors the execution of this greeky type that's almost jumping out at you, this kind of absurd positivity. To sum it up, wanted to create something very memorable, could work in store and work online, and also very much captured the energy of Jacksepticeye himself.

ARMIN It sure does that. Now you mentioned the icon being named Sunny, and then there's this other cast of characters. How did those come about? Were those again also in there from the beginning of the conversation? Did they evolve after a certain point of the process? Were there any that didn't make the cut to the roster at the end?

HUGH Very good question. We created this world, like I alluded to at the start, this idea of Planet Positivity. So the idea of every time you are in the brand of Top of the Mornin' you are in this environment of Planet Positivity and Sonny was the first cast of characters, obviously he was the icon. But honestly he felt a bit lonely in that space by himself. So we started to—not intentionally actually—almost develop this cast of psychic characters and the second character from memory that came along was Lucky, the Shamrock. 'Cuz we wanted to obviously nod, allude that idea of Seán obviously being very proud of his Irish heritage. So that led to the Shamrock character. Next along came a

Cup of Joe, 'cuz obviously with the brand's mission of creating a coffee brand that's anti-snobbery. We wanted to create this very everyday character kind of Cup of Joe, and something that was really, really explicitly talking to coffee. And then the last character, which is kind of the unsung hero really I think is Raye, the two cups of the rainbow coming together, which is very much about the inclusivity of the brand but also creating something that talked about when he share a coffee. Also Raye's the one that might come down the line might have his own spinoff down the line, who knows? They were a lot lot of fun to create.

ARMIN What I like about Raye is it reminded me a little bit of the flying carpet in Disney's Aladdin, which is like this inanimate object that has a lot of personality, and here you managed to infuse a lot of personality into two cups of coffee sharing a rainbow. Which is just a weird premise to begin with, but we're just going back and forth with the rainbow and it's very, very charming. Hugh are there any behind the scenes stories about the characters that are fond, memorable, <laugh>, anything that stood out for you as you were developing this as ambassadors for the brand?

HUGH No, I mean I love them all equally and Seán does too. But I think as Steve's alluded to there, I don't think we're finished when it comes to building out this world. When you think a lot about the space that Seán works in with his channel, he speaks about it almost being a portal to a different world, and a lot of the games he plays, obviously a similar way you discover characters as you go through the game. And Planet Positivity can be that for the coffee space too, where... it... is kind of with his, with Seán's channel, however your day's gone, whether you've had a tough day at school, a tough day at work, or you know things have been difficult, you put his channel on and for that period of time that his video's on, you've taken yourself, transported yourself to this energetic positive world.

We looked at a picture of the coffee shelves in the US and other markets around the world and it kind of felt the same that you have all these coffee bags that look the same, you have the big brands, you

have the hipster brands, but where's that window? Where's that portal into the world? That's what the bag, and the pack, and the world was meant to do. And then you end up going, okay, well we can introduce more characters and obviously there's Sunny and his friends, but there's potentially more to come through that. For us I think that was really exciting, that through that cup of coffee in the morning, through that cup of sunshine, or rainbow, just taking a moment for yourself and whatever else is going on in the day at that time, it's your moment, your chance to start with a fresh leaf that day, assess how you're gonna take things on, and I think the characters are there to support you, uplift you, hopefully entertain in time as well.

For me, and again, the reason I love Steve's work as well is characters can just do things that humans can't. They can uplift you in a different way, which is why there's so many amazing mascots in the world, and tune characters that I relate to. And so hopefully we're just at the beginning of the journey building this world, but also building the personalities of these characters out. Even in the first week of this, the fan art that we've had sent in from Seán's followers is incredible. The evolution, the way that Steve's work, and the team's work at Earthling has been taken and understood, but also evolved by the fans community is pretty remarkable and certainly a thirst for me to see so many cartoons being sent in or tagged with the brand, and hopefully shows that it's off to a good start in that sense as well.

ARMIN Yeah, that's pretty great. It's kinda like an unexpected side effect of creating something that is ownable and that people can transfer their own interpretations to appreciations off. So as long as the characters stay on track and don't get canceled like the M&M's characters, it's all good <laugh>.

HUGH I think our fans have already tried their hand at new characters too, so uh, Steve might look the job soon on that front.

ARMIN Nice! <laugh>

HUGH Great.

ARMIN Speaking of shelves, and this product is primarily sold online, direct to consumer, but what were some of the challenges in design for you Stephen, and in marketing presenting it to an audience for you Hugh, with the packaging?

HUGH I would say from a packaging point of view, while we wanted to create something kind of fun and playful, we also were very aware it is a specialty coffee. So how do those two things live harmoniously? So that almost the craft of specialty coffee was something that is fun and youthful, definitely was a challenge I would say in terms of how do those two things live together harmoniously. But I like to think we got over that hurdle throughout the process. And now I think probably one of the other challenges was this idea of Top of the Mornin' Coffee, it's a coffee brand, but obviously they also sell tea packages and hot cocoa. How do you take the brand identity we developed and start to flex it to tea, flex it to hot coco? And the very simple answer to that as we went back to that brand idea of "absurdly positive" and from a hot cocoa point of view became "absurdly indulgent". And then from a tea point of view was this "absurdly refreshing". That's where you can see we're bringing more white into the tea. We've opted for this rich deep blue color within the hot coco. But very much wanted these to deliver standalone products but also should work as a family. It was a challenge definitely to make sure this identity could have that stretch and flex, and knowing all the amazing innovations that are coming down the line for Top of the Mornin', making sure the brand identity was robust enough to be able to just keep on giving.

HUGH Steve the nail on the head. I'd say what's interesting from the company's point of view in the marketing positioning, and I know we've started direct consumer as you've referenced there, but the plan is long term for this to be on retail shelves and beyond in different formats, not just what we have in market now as well. What's interesting is just the journey that coffee's gone on over the last 50 to 60 years. The first wave of coffee was in the Post-war years with instant coffee in the US,

some of the big brands coming through then. You then had the second wave, which was the Italian approach to coffee, which Starbucks then borrowed and took the Americano, an espresso to a more widespread audience and taking it from instant coffee to this coffee shop experience. And then over the last 20 years you've had third wave coffee where you have the craft coffee shops, the baristas, the hipster aesthetic in some cases, cliched in some ways as well. And a lot of the brands that came through taking that Italian coffee shop experience and taking it to the next level where people are learning about origin of the coffee, the roast style, et cetera.

But ultimately that has felt quite snoot-ish and sometimes unapproachable for mass consumers. And so now where we believe the fourth wave of coffee is, is taking that amazing experience, and those amazing flavors, and this amazing sourcing, but delivering it to consumers in a way that feels friendly and approachable, and that you don't have to have a beard and sleeve tattoos to make a great cup of coffee. You can just enjoy it the same as anyone else. Democratizing that amazing third wave experience for the consumer is a big part of the marketing strategy, and therefore why the branding can subvert. So we can have this bold, colorful branding on a very high quality product. And that ties into what Steve said there, but that was always, I think the vision in terms of disrupting what's come before.

ARMIN So on one end you have this brooding, moody, sleeve tattoo covered <laugh> barista personality <laugh>, and then, yeah, no offense, but it is kind of a mood... then with Top of the Mornin' Coffee you have this very joyful and clearly with the brand strategy of "absurdly positive", did you ever consider or have a discussion of how absurdly positive is too positive? Did at any point where you're like, this is getting too joyful, is it too much of a good thing to deploy on people? or was it just once you're committed to the idea like this is it, we're just gonna take it to its logical extreme!

HUGH I would say we really lent in, doubled down on the positivity <laugh>. My point of view, why not? I guess in a world that right now can feel quite heavy, what the world does need is a bit of that positivity. There's obviously a lot of brands that do a very good job of having that great positive outlook on the world. And we were very conscious of how do we go positivity to a million, to a thousand? to a million? How do we really lean into that? Back to Seán and Jack's personality, that is him. It came from a genuine place, so it was, you know, how do you distill his DNA? We have no problem with it whatsoever.

HUGH I totally agree with Steve. Sorry to add in. I feel like the time we've been alive, the last four or five plus years has been particularly, I mean, it's always tough to be a human, ultimately you go back through history. But the last four or five years has been tough and there's a lot of negativity in the news cycle, and obviously people struggling with different mental health challenges and things like that. So for us, putting something in your cupboard that just uplifts you, just because it's fun, and because it's positive, and because it's just, you know, cup of coffee at the end of the day... Felt like the right thing to do. So we double clicked, as Steve said, on positivity.

ARMIN And I guess if you need to balance that amount of positivity out, you can't just turn on the news and like—

HUGH Exactly.

ARMIN Yeah, exactly. Just walk outside, you're feeling too optimistic. Now, speaking of optimism, without getting into sales figures because you know that's your deal, but what was the reaction like in terms of sales? Was it an instant hit with the audience? Given that it's a direct to consumer you don't have to wait for retailer reports to figure out if this is working or not?

HUGH Yeah, I mean it's been a busy week. I've had to have quite a few cups of Top of the Mornin' Coffee to keep up with everything that's going on. I think every channel that you could have, whether it's sales, of products, or social media, or emails, has grown faster than I've seen

anything in my career. Which makes me sound old, but it's amazing how many people you put this in front of.

Sales have been incredibly strong and remained strong every day. So I think what we've seen is, you know, it wasn't just a launch and then people lost interest. You know, if anything it's building. Obviously when Seán puts a video out, you get a lot of eyeballs on it. But the day-to-day sales, every touchpoint of the brand, you know, we are sending emails, sms, social media, everything has the branding of the packaging running through it.

And so every touchpoint is communicating. There's been phenomenally successful and we're just excited now to take the brand world that we've created and then to execute that in the various channels. And we have so many exciting ideas for ways to engage with consumers in the real life that take Steve and Earthling's work into IRL, so to speak, and into the other channels we have, whether it's video, animation, cartoon. As we progress... Though I feel we're like we're just getting started. But the response has been phenomenal. And like I said earlier, just have to look at the fan art that's been sent in to see the engagement. Seán's really happy with the launch, myself and ream are as well. If anything, it's day one for walking into Planet Positivity. We are still loading more of the world behind it, so it's exciting.

ARMIN Was there any immediate interests from retailers saying like, Hey, we want some of this action! or is it still too early for that?

HUGH We have had interests all along from retailers and particularly in the last week or so, but for us it's about going at the right pace with a direct consumer business that can be potentially as big as this one with the audience and the space to grow. But we can really test and learn and get feedback and build that relationship with consumers over the next few months. Add new products to the lineup, listen to what the fans want. We get amazing feedback and we'll be doing more and more fan surveys, asking them what other teas do you want? What

else would you like us to create? And I think that's incredible part of having a direct to consumer community like this. And then obviously a long term play is to take this to retail and we've had inbound interest already, but the opportunity for this is considerable, certainly in the US and other markets as well. So when the time's right, that's something we'll start looking into.

ARMIN Wonderful. And I love how you have said how you're listening to your community as well, just the way Stephen and Earthling listened to you. So it's all a good vicious cycle of listening to what others are saying.

HUGH Honestly, it's amazing! The audience's engagement in what Seán does, but also this brand is incredible. And generally I feel staggered by the genius of some of the ideas that we get suggested. Hopefully we can bring some of those fan ideas to life over the next few years as well.

ARMIN Great. Now, Stephen, what was the most exciting aspect of working on this project for you?

HUGH I would say exciting and terrifying and equal measure, but the idea of creating a brand that was gonna be seen by 52 million sets of eyeballs. Um, obviously with kind Seán/Jack's huge audience. For me is a career first. Whilst I was excited by it, you never quite know how it's gonna land with the audience in this community, very passionate, but luckily it seems to have landed super well. And you know, as you alluded to there, the fan art, the messages, the love, a very, very positive community. Just having that access to such a big audience from day one was a hundred percent the most exciting, I'd say. There's lots of exciting moments, but that's probably number one. Yeah,

ARMIN Yeah. It's staggering to think about that amount of people. When you say 52 million people, it's so big that you sort of lose track, <affirmative> or lose sight of just how many people that is. Most designers work for brands that have an audience of a hundred, a thousand, 10,000, a million, but think about 52 million. That's a lot of eyeballs and yeah, a lot of pressure. So well done handling it <laugh>. And Hugh, in this

whole process, what was the most exciting aspect for you working on it, having just joined this up-and-coming brand?

HUGH It's a privilege to be part of this project, to work with so many talented people. You know, just being in the room with not only Seán, but also Steve and Earthling is a privilege to watch people with that talent collaborate and work together. And hopefully I can help join the dots a little bit along the way. Seán is an amazing creator, he's an incredible entertainer, but he is also just a really nice guy. And so working with him has been a dream really to help him bring his vision to life with my skillset in consumer goods, and taking his talents. And then I think when you land on such an awesome creative idea, like "absurdly positive" and you land on amazing design work like this, that's when I get excited. And honestly, it sounds crazy, but what we've shown the world is really just a glimpse of how big this brand and this world behind it can be.

That's super exciting. What we haven't mentioned is part of this process. We partnered with the amazing charity as well in Crisis Text Line where we know we're supporting teen mental health around the world. Crisis Text line provides free 24/7 mental health support via text message for teenagers. So if you're having challenges, you text in and we donate from every bag sold and every product sold to that cause. And that was all part of this same mentality. And for me, things like that come from the team of people collaborating we had in the room at the beginning, and understanding each other, and where each other comes from. I don't think that sort of thing happens unless you really spend that time listening. So yeah, that's what I'm proud of. It's just been a joy to work on really.

ARMIN You can see the joy of the process, the joy of the product, the joy of helping this charity do their work. And it comes across in the final product. It is joyful, it is exuberant, it is "absurdly positive" and it's definitely something that we can all use more of. So thank you for bringing that into our mornings, afternoons, evenings, whenever

someone is enjoying Top of the Mornin' Coffee, or any coffee—just keep that mindset in mind. Stephen, Hugh, thank you so much for joining me on The Follow-Up today.

HUGH Thanks for having us.

HUGH Thanks Armin. Thanks Hugh.

BRYONY Underneath the amount of visual joy in this project which is literally at the forefront it's important to note what Hugh mentioned at one point, which is that behind all of the visual fanfare and YouTuber personality glitz, this is all supported by, quote, “fundamentals of a well-run business, good economics, a well-managed team, and a clear vision”, end quote, of the brand. As a new design studio, Earthling has set up a difficult precedent of having launched with such a well received project and delivering the goods for an audience of more than 50 million followers but we are definitely cheering for them as well as for Sonny, Lucky, Cup of Joe, and Raye, the four characters thriving in the made-up world of Planet Positivity, a place I wouldn't mind living in myself.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.