



Kelly Scanlon:

Welcome to this episode of Banking on KC. I'm your host, Kelly Scanlon. Joining us on this episode is Chase McNulty, the founder and CEO of the popular Kansas City brand Charlie Hustle, where Chase says his obsession with vintage t-shirts and simplistic design came to fruition, welcome Chase.

Chase McNulty:

Thanks for having me. It's good to be here.

Kelly Scanlon:

Exciting year for you.

Chase McNulty:

Oh, yeah.

Kelly Scanlon:

I mean I can just tick them off year in the midst of a growth spurt, which we'll talk about. Charlie Hustle was nominated for the KC Chambers top 10.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah.

Kelly Scanlon:

Small business but no small feat doing that. And then the big news, the really big news is that Charlie Hustle's iconic KC Heart has been adopted not just as Kansas City's official symbol but the region's-

Chase McNulty:

The region, that's right.

Kelly Scanlon:

Official symbol. That's big stuff. How cool is all that?

Chase McAnulty:

It's amazing. And that's not the biggest thing.

Kelly Scanlon:

No?

Chase McAnulty:

I have to tell you I just became a father a couple months ago.

Kelly Scanlon:

Congratulations.

Chase McAnulty:

First time, baby girl, two months old and in all the craziness already. It's a cool thing, it's really special and I'm excited for that journey.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah, how exciting. I mean, and then you've probably got her all dressed up in a little Charlie Hustle t-shirts.

Chase McAnulty:

Oh, yeah. She's definitely going to be sampling the new kids line here that we'll be working on next year.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah. Let's talk about the symbol and the agreement that you have with KCADC.

Chase McAnulty:

Sure.

Kelly Scanlon:

What does that agreement look like? Break it down for us.

Chase McAnulty:

Sure. This was kind of a direction we've wanted to go for quite some time with Charlie Hustle. The KC Heart was really a brand within a brand. I think the KC Heart is really what was this company was founded on. I wanted to do collegiate and professional sportswear, but then we could quickly pivot into this civic pride thing. And all the things we've done with the KC Heart, giving back to the community, we've raised over a million dollars through local charities and various community efforts, which something I'm most proud of. But we also knew that it could mean a whole lot more. This has become kind of the city's icon that you see it on the Plaza every day [crosstalk 00:02:23]

Kelly Scanlon:

You do, yes.

Chase McNulty:

People wearing it everywhere.

Kelly Scanlon:

See it in the airports, you see it when you travel.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah.

Kelly Scanlon:

People wearing it in other cities even.

Chase McNulty:

Exactly. And as a small business for us we're focused on being good at what we do. I think it's important to remain focused, but at the same time we didn't have the right people in the room to really elevate this thing to the next level or the right focus to do that. The KCADC kind of came to us at the right time and pitched the idea and we actually said, "Where have you been?"

Kelly Scanlon:

Well and it comes at a good time, at a time when both sides of the State Line essentially are agreeing not to get into the economic wars with luring companies across the State Line and then your heart also becoming a unifying factor. Essentially what this agreement does is to put the heart in the public domain.

Chase McNulty:

Yes. Essentially, now we are kind of protecting it on the merchandise side. We still need to protect our business and what that means. But the marketability of it for the community is really what the effort is geared towards. Putting it in the skyline, putting it on the KC Car, cash-

Kelly Scanlon:

That's streetcar.

Chase McNulty:

Streetcar, thank you. It's been a long day or the new airport, there's a lot of things happening in developing there. We've talked about having a KC Heart as you enter and exit the airport, those are really cool things that a little t-shirt company probably can't accomplish on its own.

Kelly Scanlon:

When you say essentially it does for marketing purposes, for the city and the region it's in the public domain, but somebody that also wants to make t-shirts or merchandise and other private company can't just come in and use it that way.

Chase McNulty:

Right. But we are creating a licensing program that is run through KC.org.

Kelly Scanlon:

Okay.

Chase McNulty:

And people will be able to come on and it's just like collegiate licensing, if you wanted a KU license, you've got to go through them to use it.

Kelly Scanlon:

Right.

Chase McNulty:

We're asking people to do it the right way. You will have the support of KCADC and Charlie Hustle. We will ultimately decide on the products that go out there, but I also feel like we want to see the makers and creators here in Kansas City do cool stuff with it and who are we to stop that? We just want to be able to control the narrative.

Kelly Scanlon:

Exactly.

Chase McNulty:

And make sure it continues to be elevated and not used for just personal gain.

Kelly Scanlon:

With your relationship now with the KCADC, how will this new approach start rolling out? What will we see as citizens?

Chase McNulty:

Sure. We're in a lot of different discussions right now with them. We had a big meeting with their entire staff and our leadership just a couple of weeks ago talking about some of the big ideas. I think it's something that will evolve over time. The first thing, making it the city's flag we were producing, we actually just got done with some sampling right now and we're getting ready to produce a bunch of flags for all the community partners of KCADC. You'll see the flag at companies like Cerner and Garmin and Hallmark and hopefully everywhere. It's really just getting the community to really embrace it further on that next level. And then it's not up to us. It's up to our entire community to kind of elevate this thing.

Kelly Scanlon:

Let's step back a minute. Let's talk about Charlie Hustle.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah.

Kelly Scanlon:

The larger company. We talked about the iconic brand with the heart, but let's talk about Charlie Hustle itself. What was your inspiration for starting it?

Chase McNulty:

When I was in high school and college, I was the t-shirt guy, if you will.

Kelly Scanlon:

Everyone has one.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah. I was always interested in '70s and '80s t-shirts. I thought, again the simplistic design, the stories they told. I just became connoisseur of these things, whether it was an 81 rolling stones t-shirt or a 1985 Royals World Series t-shirt. I loved the simplicity of how they looked. It wasn't gaudy graphics and cheap cotton. It was nice soft material that again told a story.

Chase McNulty:

I wanted to create something where people see on the streets, it's a walking billboard and it's a conversation piece. And I think we think about that in everything we design. Is somebody actually going to talk about this? Is somebody going to stop you and say, "What a cool shirt." Our slogan is Vintage Made Fresh. All that inspiration that I grew up with is now what I get to do every day, I get to bring it to a modern era. And that's really the goal behind Charlie Hustle. What we do is, it's Vintage Made Fresh and really the community piece has evolved now, it's cool to see how we evoke happiness in the community, I think people are attracted to that.

Kelly Scanlon:

Let's talk about the name you told us all about the inspiration and how you get some of your ideas and so forth, but Charlie Hustle, where did the inspiration for that name come from?

Chase McNulty:

A lot of different things. I think Chase growing up stood for Charlie or Charles, which is not the case my name is Chase. You can check my license, my driver's license if you want. And then kind of the entrepreneurial hustle there was a company out of Boston called Johnny Cupcakes and I loved what he did with his brand. It was really kind of a strange idea. He was selling t-shirts inside of a bakery, had zero cupcakes. But he created this subculture in this just cult following that I thought was extremely impressive and Johnny Cupcakes just rolled off the tongue. It was a cool name to get behind.

Kelly Scanlon:

It's a funny name too.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah, I mean it's a funny brand, but what he's done is absolutely amazing and impressive. And so Charlie Hustle to me, it's relative to sports, vintage sports. There's the Pete Rose reference. I think a lot of people might refer Charlie Hustle to him, but Charlie Hustle's been kind of a name for a moniker for somebody in the, whether it's the public eye or somebody that just hustles to feed his family or get things done. And I really liked all the things that tied in there. There's no great elevator pitch to explain the Charlie Hustle name, but I think when you're building a company you need a name that you can really get behind. And for me it was personal but it also had legs that was relative to what we were trying to accomplish.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah and at the end of the day. You liked it and you were comfortable with it and it has a nice ring to it.

Chase McAnulty:

Yeah. Well thank you.

Kelly Scanlon:

It really does. What did you do to grow the company?

Chase McAnulty:

Well, it's all learned. I don't think this is anything that business school will teach you.

Kelly Scanlon:

No.

Chase McAnulty:

I think it's all about experiences. We started as really... My wife and I, she was kind of handling the marketing side and I was doing all the creative stuff and we were just building and we had a small office in the East Crossroads that had four people in it. One guy was doing social and operations and whatever. And there're different phases of business. There's that fun startup phase everything's exciting [crosstalk 00:10:45].

Kelly Scanlon:

You don't mind working 20 hours a day.

Chase McAnulty:

Yeah. You don't mind working. It's not super lucrative, but if you believe in it, there's a future there I guess. But after you have some big breaks. We had a perfect storm of events in 2014 and it's all kind of planted over time. I think luck is kind of things that you create in a sense. Luck is created, I believe that and we had Paul Rudd pop-up on-

Kelly Scanlon:

Yes.

Chase McAnulty:

National TV during a time when the Royals were in their first World Series in 30 years. The city was excited and he claimed that to be his favorite t-shirt on National TV. And what that did, it was October 29, 2014 I was out to dinner with my wife and we were almost in tears because we were like, how are we going to fulfill all these orders? And those are just-

Kelly Scanlon:

It was a good problem to have.

Chase McAnulty:

Yeah.

Kelly Scanlon:

But it was a problem.

Chase McAnulty:

Yeah. It was a great problem to have and I think that's that first stage.

Kelly Scanlon:

What did you do? I mean you've got this buzz, it's more than a buzz. You're developing a cult following at this point really, I think is what you would call it. And all of that goodwill that you had spent time building and you suddenly get your big break. If you hadn't been able to fulfill those orders, you would have gone backwards actually. You would have squandered all of that you had earned. What did you do to get through that? How did you on pretty short notice build a team and a system to fulfill those orders?

Chase McAnulty:

Well, the orders do help. That provides some cash flow for your company and then you got to make the right decisions. And there's a lot of failures, there's a lot of learning lessons. It was something to build on and we also quickly kind of pivoted from this vintage sports referential collegiate professional sports focus to really this civic pride Kansas City focus. And we said, "Let's start there and let's build on that." And over time we've been able to kind of leverage that to have bigger conversations with bigger and better organizations or the Chiefs deal, big deal for us. That was kind of headed up by Mark Donovan, the president. He wanted to see a piece of that referential business. There's plenty of people out there making red and yellow t-shirts. He thought we'd be a good match to do that.

Chase McAnulty:

And it's been great for us. But those are things that really helped legitimize us and it opens new markets. Even in 2013 before the heart took off, we did a collaboration with the Negro League Baseball Museum here in Kansas City where we had a Kickstarter campaign that raised \$25,000 and that was a really cool step because it was again another piece of our business that we got to begin to grow. And I think you just keep going, you keep adding on and you try to do it the right way and now it's more important to really focus on what's available growth, what's right in front of you.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah. And it sounds like from what you're talking about here, some companies make the mistake of being so in the moment that you can't see the forest for the trees anymore, but it sounds like although you had to have your fingers and toes and everything else that worked in the business in order to manage all this day to day stuff that was going on, that you still made time to get up to that 30,000 foot level and look at what's the future look like, what are we going to need to do to sustain this rather than just put every ounce of your energy into the day to day just to get through those orders and through that growth.

Chase McAnulty:

Yeah, I think every company has a visionary in it, whether it's the person that created the company or the CEO is a nice label for that, but it's that visionary mindset that you have to see into the future. I think when you're developing kind of a grassroots startup business, you have to begin to fill the needs and take things off your plate and be able to delegate that, which is probably even tougher to do.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yes.

Chase McNulty:

Because you have to be able to set the vision moving forward. Otherwise, there's not a lot of purpose for your team to understand why they're doing what they're doing. I think it's vital for the employees inside of a company to understand the mission, the values, the purpose of why are we showing up to work every day.

Kelly Scanlon:

They have to own it.

Chase McNulty:

They have to own it. But you also have to be the one that sets that tone because you're the one made for the job, I guess.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah. Over the years there have been many retailers who've sold Kansas City centric merchandise. Why did Charlie Hustle achieve what some would say, and I referred to it before as cult status. Why do you think Kansas Citians have embraced it so much?

Chase McNulty:

I think it's really about... We've created an attraction to our brand. It's not just cool designs, it's not just marketing. I think people see us and we're having fun. We talk about the purpose inside of our company a lot. Our purposes evoke happiness in everything that we do. Whether it's somebody coming into the office, if it's the FedEx guy, it's our job to make sure he's taken care of, he's having a good day, ask him about his day. It's the same thing as a customer coming into your store. We wanted to kind of create an experience that also goes with your company culture. We want to make sure people enjoy being there every day and that we are looking after their careers. We have a duty to... I'm not just looking after employees, I'm looking after their families too. And that's a big responsibility. But I think that evoke happiness is what made us attractive. People were interested kind of in the fun we were having.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yeah. Want to be a part of it.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah. And it created this community in that groundswell. I think it's everything combined and you got to look at all the facets of your business and I really believe in having that mission and having that, why do we do things? Why do we do what we do? And how are we going to do it?

Kelly Scanlon:

Where do you go from here now?

Chase McNulty:

You talked about us really being in a growth stage.

Kelly Scanlon:

Yes.

Chase McNulty:

And to me that's the most fun of anything, it's this new unknown, what are the opportunities that are here now and available to us? We've done all these different things and we've built the brand, now it's time to really build the business. Now you're looking at expenses and you're looking at your cost of goods, how can you become more profitable? You look at all your partners and who you're working with and really begin to dissect everything you've done the last seven years and how can you do it better. And then I think that vision piece is important. How do you take it to the next level? You have to be able to explain that vision, whether it's a three year picture, some companies have 10 year plans. I don't necessarily believe in the 10 year plan for small business.

Kelly Scanlon:

Things change so much [crosstalk 00:19:04]

Chase McNulty:

Things change so first.

Kelly Scanlon:

From week to week even sometimes. But what will we see? We won't see all of those discussions.

Chase McNulty:

Yeah.

Kelly Scanlon:

And so forth. But how is that going to manifest itself publicly?

Chase McNulty:

Well, we're trying to... Our kind of vision right now is on the middle really embracing Kansas City in the foundation we've created here. But I think we've got a lot to share with other markets. And we see the analytics of people who are shopping us and there's opportunity in St. Louis, even Chicago. You look at the universities and I think Arkansas is a big push for us. Kansas State, Woodstock State, we have a lot of clout with Kansas and Missouri because that's in our medium market. But how do we expand and share what we're really good at to these other markets with Charlie Hustle, not necessarily the KC Heart brand. That's why that strategy's kind of almost separating in a sense. But we want to look at the middle of the map, Nebraska, Omaha and Lincoln. What can we do in Iowa? Where are our wholesale accounts going? And how can we provide them and offering that can support their needs?

Kelly Scanlon:

What do you see as Charlie Hustle's greatest influence in the community and its legacy at the end of the day?

Chase McAnulty:

I think it honestly, it goes right back to evoking happiness. We've created attractability, a community that people want to be a part of. We have a duty to represent that and continue to build on that. I think it's really cool to see people walking around wearing your t-shirts, but there's a bigger thing there with the KC Heart that's a legacy that's kind of being created.

Kelly Scanlon:

Well and it ties into a legacy that heart goes back, not your particular heart, but the heart and Kansas City goes back over a hundred years I think.

Chase McAnulty:

Absolutely, yeah. We brought it to prevalence on a t-shirt, but you look at the railroad stations back in the day had a little pin that they handed out to their passengers or the Bello Perc and then actually the Plaza here in Country Club Plaza on their light poles used to have a KC Heart inside of them. And we all know the Monarchs Patch with the Negro League, the Kansas City Monarchs. And so it's always been a thing and we just kind of made it more of a thing I guess and owned it. And it's really cool to see how the city has rallied behind it because it's much bigger than us. Charlie Hustle, it's a whole community effort.

Kelly Scanlon:

Absolutely. And Chase, thank you so much for taking the time to be our guest on this episode of Banking on KC. We really appreciate everything you're doing for not just Kansas City, but for the community as a whole, for the region as a whole. We appreciate that.

Chase McAnulty:

Thanks for having me. I'm happy to be here and this is awesome.

Joe Close:

This is Joe Close, President of Country Club Bank. It's hard to underestimate the impact Charlie Hustle has had on Kansas City's brand. As Chase, tells it. The company started off relatively small running lean in the Crossroads. That is until actor Paul Rudd stepped onto the national stage during the height of the Royals World Series run wearing a Charlie Hustle t-shirt. He wasn't just advertising Kansas City or Charlie Hustle. He was demonstrating his love for Kansas City. Charlie Hustle had its golden opportunity. Chase and his wife Holly had their big break and the pair stepped up to the play. They fulfilled a massive swath of orders, leaned into evoking happiness and cultivating civic pride with their brand and just a few years later, they represent The Heart of Kansas City. Chase and Holly's story is one of my favorite modern entrepreneurial success stories in Kansas City. They found a niche, snatched an opportunity and with ingenuity and hard work rose to national prominence. It's all about the hustle. Every shirt, every day. Thanks for tuning in this week we're banking on you Kansas City. Country Club Bank member FDIC.