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Thinking Outside the Bud

Episode 411 - Lex Corwin <u>https://www.thinkingoutsidethebud.com/podcast/</u>sustainable-cannabis-cultivation-and-market-expansi on-with-stone-road-ceo-lex-corwin

Sustainable Cannabis Cultivation and Market Expansion with Stone Road's CEO, Lex Corwin

In this episode, join us for an insightful conversation with Lex Corwin, the CEO and Founder of Stone Road. We delve into sustainable cannabis cultivation practices and Stone Road's journey of market expansion. Lex shares his experiences, including his background in farming and how his brand has thrived in various states, focusing on community engagement, unique branding strategies, and business growth. Explore the world of cannabis and gain valuable insights from Lex Corwin's extensive experience in the industry.

Founded in 2016 at the age of 23 by founder and CEO Lex Corwin, Stone Road was created as a queer-led, family run brand committed to harvesting and creating accessible, affordable cannabis products without sacrificing style. Through Stone Road, Lex is reimagining what affordable cannabis can look like, taste, and feel like with design-forward, sustainable packaging and avant-garde campaign imagery. Raised in New York City, Lex moved West for college and began working as the co-manager of a boutique, family-owned medical cannabis cooperative in Portland, OR. He cut his teeth in the legal cannabis space with roles in cultivation, manufacturing, and distribution while working towards his degree. Lex has come a long way since those early days in Portland and has propelled Stone Road to becoming one of the fastest growing cannabis companies in the California, Oklahoma, Massachusetts, and Michigan markets. Today, Stone Road is available in over 400 retail outlets across four states with New Mexico coming next, and additional expansions in the works. When he's not running the brand from Stone Road's Venice office, Lex is tending to Stone Road's 57 acre, off-grid, biodynamic family farm in Nevada City, CA.

https://stoneroad.org/ https://www.instagram.com/stoneroadfarms/

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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You're listening to Thinking Outside the bud where we speak with entrepreneurs, investors, thought leaders, researchers, advocates and policymakers who are finding new and exciting ways for cannabis to positively impact business, society and culture. And now, here's your host, business coach, Bruce Eckfeldt.

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1:07

Welcome everyone. This is thinking outside the bud. I'm Bruce Eckfeldt. I'm your host, our guest today is Alexi Corwin. He is CEO and Founder at Stone Road. We're gonna talk about the world of cannabis about brands about integrated markets and kind of where we are in terms of really kind of expanding the industry and what Lex and his team are doing. And a couple of different markets. I'm interested in this conversation, I always find people that are operating in multiple markets have a whole different set of sort of complexities and things to think about. As most people listen to the program. No, cannabis is a little unique when it comes to how things are regulated, how the markets develop, and how you kind of operate in multiple states and multiple, you know, multiple markets and kind of the complexities that come with them. And some of the strategies that come with it as well. So excited for the conversation excited to kind of hear the story and and see what see what's going on with stone road. Thanks. Yeah, welcome to the program. Before we kind of dive into stone road and what's going on today. I'd love to get some background how I guess generally what was your professional background? How did you get into cannabis? Tell us a little bit of the story

2:08

for sure. I mean, I've I've always kind of been in cannabis. I like to say I the name stone road is from the first place that I ever grew cannabis. I was kind of mischievous youth growing up in New York and my parents and I decided to go to a off grid rural farm school for my junior year of high school. Interesting. Yeah. So it gave me a lot of really unique and helpful life skills, but also, you know, showed me how to grow everything. Well,

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this was in New York, or where was it? Yeah. So

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it was in inverse your Vermont population. 650 people, it was extremely different from my upbringing in New York, where my apartment building had more than

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probably the floor of your apartment building and where that,

2:55

yeah, so for me, yeah, I mean, I learned the basically the basics of organic agriculture. And it really inspired you know, a love of nature, a love of the outdoors, a love of farming, and you know, basically just how much work goes into a farm, but also like, how rewarding it can be. And so for me, when I came back being like, already, like a rabid pothead, I quickly ordered seeds from Amsterdam. And I planted them on my neighbor's property, of course, in a Town, Connecticut, where my parents had a beach house, and so the road that she lived on was stone road. Please, never stopped sets.

3:41

I love it. I love it. Well, so. So connect the dots a little bit, I mean, say, Well, I guess let's go back to the kind of farming practices and what you learned, I mean, how directly were you able to apply those things? What kind of practices or things like didn't work as well, you had to kind of translate because of cannabis, either because of the nature of cannabis and the plant or because of how cannabis, you know, from a regulatory point of view, I mean, it was, what was how do you transfer this knowledge that you gained into the work that you're doing with cultivation,

4:10

so I mean, all kind of farming and growing basically relies on like the four main, like nutrients. And so, you know, obviously, every plant is different, but just understanding how to grow such a wide variety of, you know, fruits and vegetables in high school, kind of, it also just inspired a love of farming. And so, you know, I didn't back down from the process, it was, you know, the whole stone road thing is like the, the way that I grew up my first year when I was 16. And 2009 was borderline on smokeable. And so, you know, East Coast, ditch weed and so I had to buy, you know, an ounce of good weed and out to tobacco and I mixed it all up, and I pre rolled stone rode spliffs, I sold them to my friends and other kids for 20 bucks a pop and I could not believe how much money I made. I literally just never stopped, I just started then, when I ran out, I started buying weed and grinding up in my room Much to my, you know, my parents under their nose just trying to be discreet and, you know, basically rolling these pre rolled joints in high school, and, you know, it was really, really successful. And, you know, I made a bunch of money and then I went to school in Portland, Oregon, and, you know, the industry was in the medical phase, but it was clear that it was moving them to the, you know, recreational but there was a booming medical market. So, you know, I quickly I didn't care too much for academics. And so I spent most of my time you know, driving out to White Salmon, Washington Hood River, Oregon, which is about two hours outside of Portland and, you know, just meeting with growers and working there and, and, you know, I learned so much from so many incredible growers and actually forged relationships with one where he, you know, he needed help getting this product into Portland shops, and he had no form of, you know, bookkeeping, accounting, and it was kind of a great match because I was able to learn all this great cultivation knowledge from him, but in turn, I was able to professionalize his business. And we grew a lot together.

6:25

How much in the beginning was I mean, we, you mentioned the cultivation practices and kind of understanding how to how to grow how much of the business knowledge I guess, where did you get your business kind of knowledge was at the early stages of

6:37

Yeah, I was always extremely entrepreneurial. I joke with my parents that I, you know, I literally started a new business every year since second grade, like not today, you know, from selling like knockoff, like, colorful, LIVESTRONG knockoff bracelets that I would buy, like, on Canal Street in New York. To YuGiOh cards with that was hot, too. You know, one of my friends, family, one of my friends family has had a huge annual Christmas party and we were at his house. And they were left with, you know, like, literally pallets of Snapple. And so we told our school is labeling in fifth grade, that we had too much sports equipment, and we need an additional locker and we opened up a shop in the locker selling, because this is a little private, all boys school. So of course, there are no vending machines with, you know, anything sugary, so he basically opened up like an underground store. So you know, snapples and sodas, and then we expand into pens, and like school supplies, and until that all got shut down. So I was always naturally very entrepreneurial, and my dad was also in finance. And so just growing up with a basic understanding of like, what your GAAP accounting is, and like, you know, what a balance sheet is. And, you know, the difference between, you know, revenue and EBIT, da, and it's like all these things that I took for granted, just because they were like normal discussions, also, just having, you know, the Sunday New York Times delivered to Us Weekly, and just, you know, reading through it, and the amount of information I was just able to soak up, gave the too much self confidence, you know, basically delusional, delusional self confidence, you know, I've made a walk the walk and talk the talk, even though if I, even if I had never done a business before I knew we'd and I knew sales. And that was pretty much all I needed. And so I joke with my parents, I don't think it's that funny. But I made more money in college, basically selling weed than what they had spent sending me there. And it was a private school. So it was a good about a dough. And so, you know, for me, it was just graduating from college, I had a huge little, little starter stash of dough. And so you know, I went into real estate development, my mom's in real estate. So it was very natural to me, I'd been looking at floor plans before I could talk and, you know, I did that for a year and a half. And, you know, my boss at the time, who is the founder and CEO of the real estate development firm I was working for graciously, you know, allowed me to work out of his office for six months provided, you know, the initial seed capital helps be, you know, manufacture at his house for the first six months the medical business and really just provided a platform for me to start stone road and, you know, we bought the farm in 2016. And of course, this is cannabis. So of course, you knew, you know, the shit is coming. And, you know, it was six months after buying the farm. I started with two business partners, one of which, who, you know, robbed us at gunpoint and cleared out our warehouse and the other who sued me because he left but you know, it was just one of those things where it was Like, it was like an MBA program wrapped up in 12 months.

10:05

Exactly. be arrogant start a cannabis business.

10:08

Yeah, I mean, if it can go wrong, it's gonna go wrong. And that's basically what I learned, I also learned any project is going to take probably three to four times as long, it'd be three to five, three to four times as expensive. And so just, you know, understanding that as a 2324 year old really allowed me when COVID came around in 2020, where I had a small business before COVID, you know, the fact that people were getting paid to sit at home and smoke weed, you know, our business grew fabulously. I mean, we grew literally over 800% of the Year, and Yara took us to a new level.

10:42

So I guess, do you feel like you're, you know, kind of unique ability is kind of bringing together kind of this the cultivation side, the business practice side, the financial understandings like what's, where do you kind of find your kind of unique kind of skills or capabilities are in terms of, you know, being in the cannabis space?

11:05

I mean, I think you need a few different things, for me, tapping into the community that we do was going to support us, which was initially the queer community and still is, you know, I'm gay myself. And so when I started the brand, and we had no money, because we had spent all of our investor dog dumb shit, and so classic, yeah, so we had no money, and we needed content. And we needed an audience. And I just basically put out like an open call, like, do you want to make content for us, we'll feature it on our rapidly growing Instagram, and we have a cool brand. And I mean, for the first two years, we literally didn't pay for content. And it also not only had a great effect of giving us so much free marketing material, but it also really fostered and built a large community of people who identified with our marketing or felt like they had kind of played a small role in the growth of stone road and, you know, created some really loyal, you know, customers. So for us, leading into that, and creating imagery that, you know, I always joke like, when I was kind of entering the cannabis space in 2016, you know, you have the like beard that no white farmer or you have like the heavily tattooed girl Dabig, next to the pool and Palm Springs, so there wasn't really anything big, like, marketed in between that it was like kind of two ends of the spectrum. But I didn't really see myself in either of those. So it's like, alright, there has to be something more, there has to be something like, high end beautiful, interesting, provocative, I always joke on panels and stuff that were the equal opportunity to do this. Because, you know, if you look at our Instagram, I always joke like, one of our investors is a little older than me, he texts me, he goes, I'm not sure your latest photo, if it's a woman or a man. But I guess that's the point that I was like, that's not the point. But we'll run with it. You know, so for us, it was created really kind of provocative imagery that the cannabis industry had never seen before. And we had rapid growth on our Instagram and we had people, you know, reaching out, there's a lot of queer people or cannabis, there's a lot of queer buyers and people who initially put us on their shelf, just because they wanted to support a gueer brand. And then we're blown away by how well the products did. Because, you know, we never asked for anyone to buy us because, you know, we're clear on company. I mean, if you want to give us a shot, we're down to compete with any brand on a level playing field. But ultimately, you have to create products that really speak for themselves and not consumer socks off. So for that, you know, it meant having our own farm doing our own cultivation, growing the type of cannabis that we wanted to bring to our customers and doing it in, you know, a really sustainable fashion, which also became a unique selling point that, you know, so many other brands in California are completely co packed. So for us, saying, Hey, we actually grow our own cannabis. And not only do we grow cannabis, but we do it hyper sustainably at our own farm. And, you know, we really leaned into that messaging, and, you know, that's had a lot of success. For us. It's also had, you know, it's pretty necessary to compete in California, which is the largest, most competitive cannabis market in the world, you know, we needed to own multiple steps of the supply chain to be able to have the margins to compete with some of these larger players. So everything happened for a reason. And, you know, we wouldn't be in the spot. We were today without, you know, our initial push into the queer community, and, you know, women at large and having the farm.

14:51

Yeah. So, a bunch of questions. Let's talk about the the whole idea of community because I find this is really both kind of interesting, and I think it's somewhat unique in terms of cannabis in terms of the ability, the importance of kind of figuring out your segment or your the market that you really want to, you know, develop or focus on and developing a community around that, like, I guess, how important do you feel? Just the

concept of community is inside cannabis? And how have you seen it kind of develop and evolve? I mean, you mentioned the beginning, there was, you know, basically kind of this stoner culture and a little bit of an old culture. That was the big focus. But, you know, today, we've got so many different groups that are using cannabis cannabis products. I mean, how do you kind of look at community from a strategy point of view,

15:39

it's really like every brand needs their set of loyalists, and it's just figuring out who your brand resonates with. And so for me, a lot of it was, like, who's kind of support us initially, then just leaning into that, you know, it's like, we knew we had a lot of fans in the gueer community, we knew we had a lot of supporters. And so that it's doing things like, you know, this year, we had six different pride strains were like, you know, in prior years, we've done three that had, you know, maybe more like gay man focus names were this year, we did, you know, one four, by kind of awareness, we did one called by now gay later, which is a play on obviously, by now gay later, and we did one for lesbians called second date wedding cake playing off the joke that lesbians love to rush into marriage, and, you know, just using all these different colors of different, you know, pride flags for our stickers, just to create products that, you know, we know, the consumers will love, you know, there's no room in California cannabis to produce products that won't, you know, absolutely crush it, you know, it's like, you have to build products, that you know, that there's a market for it, because unless you have, you know, the \$30 million marketing budget of can to basically, you know, invent this space, you know, you just, you got to be really savvy, and you really gotta just create products that, you know, the market is hungry for. And for us, it's really fresh, we basically produce batch sizes that we know, will sell out in 90 days. So we don't have some products sitting on the shelf for 10 months. It's hyper potent, you know, we, we we use, you know, hash that we manufacture ourselves. And we use THCA diamonds, which are like 99% potent to really get our infused products into the 40s percent, not because those are necessarily products that I could personally consume. But like, you know, the markets there the market wanted it, you know, the whole distillate fueled craze and like, you know, 2019 2020 2021 with fuzzies, you know, they were the hottest payroll in California, and they did like the distillate infused with passion. And we wanted to do something like that. But we didn't want to use distillate it was Gavi, the high was bad, it was messy. And so we basically found these like THCA diamonds, that's like odorless, tasteless, and pretty much pure THC. So interesting. Yeah, we'll give it a little spread, call the product birds the same way it tastes the same way. But you know, we're gonna get those numbers. Yeah.

18:25

Do you find this as like, you figure out kind of your segment? And then you figure out the products that that segment wants? Or is this that you look at the products or the kind of the type of cannabis you want to be producing the products you want to be developing? And then find the market for it? Like, which? Which way do you have you found has been the kind of leading factor in this.

18:44

So originally, yeah, it was just kind of throw our ideas to the wall and see what stuck. And then we launched lots of different products, none of which we still sell as kind of the, you know, as the market has shifted, we've realized that consumers want smaller joints and bigger packs of them. So while we still sell singles, because we like to have products that are available to you know, 100% of cannabis consumers, that means having a sub \$10 out the door single, the real growth recently has been in, you know, 10 packs, both, you know, in California, and in Massachusetts, we found that, you know, those those sales, you know, those sales have really outpaced other product sectors, as the market continues to kind of consolidate. So, you know, again, just listening to the market and building products that we think you know, will resonate with it.

19:41

Yeah, I wanted to go back to some stuff you mentioned about the cultivation practices and the fact that you're an integrated operation. I mean, other than kind of your background in cultivation and you know, desire to make sure that you're you're developing high quality product. What else have you found that having an integrated system demonstrated, you know, business this way has allowed you to do I mean is there stuff around production around management around supply chain, what have been some kind of the benefits of having an operation setup like yours.

20:11

So many, I mean, I always joke in the beginning, it was the farm, saving the brand, because the brand would just hemorrhage money. And the only way that we made actual money was like selling wholesale flour just into the general market, and that money sustained the brand. And then it all kind of flipped in, like late 2021, when the kind of COVID craze was kind of subsiding, and like the biomass prices started to really fall off a cliff. I mean, they had been dropping precipitously, but it started to get really bad, like, you know, 500 \$600 pounds, where they've been solidly, you know, nine to 1200. And so the farm then needed the brand to survive. So it's like, if I didn't have both, you know, we would have probably been out of business a long time ago, where now 100% Of what we grow at the farm goes into the brand. And because you know, we're doing the manufacturing, you know, we're able to basically make a higher margin, you know, the more steps of the supply chain you control, the higher the margin, you know, the less middlemen and also honestly, the higher quality product, because we can control how long it takes to get out to, you know, market where a lot of these other brands that are purely co packed are completely at the whim of their CO packer, which you know, if it takes six weeks to get something to market, it's like you're no longer selling the freshest cannabis and a lot of that has regulations, but also a lot of that it's just, you know, generally like the executive control, like if you don't have final say over when the product goes out, you're at the whim of someone else.

21:53

Yeah. You mentioned this sort of hyper sustainable practices. I mean, what I guess what are you doing, uniquely in terms of how you're actually cultivating, you know, soil management, things like that, like, what are the things that you're doing that put you into this hyper sustainable mode?

22:11

In terms of the farm? Yeah, well, we couldn't get electricity. So that was a good. That was a good choice. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, we are off grid, we got the entire property that I bought, you know, we bought it out of foreclosure. It was the bank was taking the property. You know, we bought 57 acres, the beautiful Sierra Nevadas for only \$335,000. And so when we got pg&e to come quote us how much it would cost to bring power to our property? They said 1.3 million. I said, Okay, I guess, regarding solar, and yeah, that settles that. And so yeah, we installed a large, large solar setup all the water, you know, we weren't on county water, it's all came from our own deep water. Well, we've since drilled an additional two wells on the property. And, you know, a lot of our marketing and branding revolves around that this, you know, this isn't some, you know, Salinas or Santa Barbara based super farm with greenhouses, as far as the eye can see, this is a really small, deliberate 10,000 square feet on a 57 acre property, which really leaves 99.5% of the property completely wild and untamed. And like, you know, the animals and the flowers and the birds that make up the rest of the property that kind of give it its magic, you know, we brought on to the website, if you go to stone road.org, you know, you're greeted by our logo. But anyway, you click around the logo, it spawns a hand drawn, little

animation of the, you know, the birds, the bees, the worms and the frogs and the flowers that kind of create the farm. And we've since kind of taken that identity and applied it really strongly into our branding, our merch and people have loved it. I mean, it's not only super cute, but it kind of gives people a better idea of where their cannabis is actually coming from.

24:03

Yeah, no, it's great. The the beautifully designed products. I'm so just kind of looking to the website. And it's, it's powerful, I guess, tell us a little bit about expansion. You're working in a couple of different markets now. Like, what was the decision process? Like how have you chosen these how they've been going give us a sense of how you're doing on the on the growth side?

24:22

Yeah, I mean, we, like I'd say, in 2019, I got an email that changed my life. It was from a gentleman in Oklahoma who said, Oh, I just got back from my annual California trip. I bought basically every pre roll I could find yours was the best. And he said I want I am launching this huge operation in Oklahoma where the third largest or he was like, We're the largest liquor distributor currently, but we're selling the business and we're going into cannabis. And so I flew down there and met with the team. Super nice guy. is really impressive amount of infrastructure. And so Oklahoma was our first deal. We signed in 2019. And launched literally the week of the COVID lockdowns in the Yeah, the first first week of March and into 2020. And obviously, that was really good for sales. And then it just kind of had a snowball effect where once we were like, a joke, like a baby Emma, so then kind of the offers just started coming in. And then the following year, we did Massachusetts, and you know that the year after we got an opportunity in Michigan, you know, both states, we're currently on shelves, and then we're about to launch in New Mexico, I think by the time this episode comes out, we should have products live in New Mexico, and that's our fifth market and New York will be our sixth market right after.

25:58

And what have you noticed, I mean, you know, obviously, sort of different markets, I guess, how have you had to kind of navigate adjust? What I guess what are you noticing in terms of the markets that are particularly interesting, or, you know, you're successful, and maybe the ones that are more challenging,

26:12

every market is challenging? For different reasons. I mean, the Massachusetts market is amazing, but we've almost been crippled a little bit by our success, just in terms of, you know, we literally still can't even keep up with demand a year later, which is obviously not great, because we're leaving a lot of money on the table. But you know, when you license the brand out, you are kind of at the whim of your co manufacturer. So, you know, we learned from that, that we didn't have enough kind of control in the decision making process. And so for New Mexico, we're doing our first revenue share, where we have a lot more say, you know, we contributed the packaging for freight, in the agreement. And so we, you know, are basically able to, you know, just have a seat at the table, and, you know, have more skin in the game and be more involved. And, you know, we haven't launched there yet, but it's our same partners from Oklahoma, so we thought we liked them, but like doing business with them. So yeah, it's just learning from prior experiences. You know, at Michigan, the launch was amazing. I mean, we sold literally 10s of 1000s, of joy, sob launch. And, and now it's about, you know, okay, we're only selling a few single, we have to have way more form factors. You know, what does that look like at a Michigan market where the prices are continuing to drop? There's a lot of retail compression, you know, and it's like, okay, let's, we know, any product that we bring to market has to absolutely knock it out of the park,

because there's just like California, there's just no room for, you know, something that's not gonna fly off the shelf.

27:55

Yeah. Any other markets that look interesting to you right now? Anything in your roadmap in terms of where you hope to be?

28:00

Yeah, I mean, we're doing a deal in New Jersey, but the prices of biomass are so outrageous, that doesn't really make sense for us to launch right now with you know, we definitely lean into our value price point. That doesn't really make sense there right now, but we'll be keenly watching that market, we are working towards getting approved in Ohio. And that will be another market. We might wait for this federal legalize, not federal, the recreational ballot that's going on there. Because obviously, there'll be a lot of packaging changes. And then yeah, I mean, we're just looking for new markets. It's like we're not doing any legacy markets. There's gonna not gonna be any Washington, Colorado or Oregon. launches. But you know, Arizona, definitely Nevada. I'm actually in Nevada right now. You know, we'll definitely be doing something here. So, you know, it's just ultimately, any place that has a great partner working. Yeah.

28:57

Like, so it's been a pleasure. If people want to find out more about you more about stone Road, what's the best way to get that information?

29:02

Yeah, you can DM us on Instagram. It's Stone Road Farms. On Instagram. You can email us info at Stone road.org. You can go to our website, stoneroad.org. And yeah, reach out. We'd love to hear from you.

29:19

Perfect. I'll make sure that the links in the handles and everything are in show notes so people can get that. Like it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time today.

29:26

Of course. Thanks for having me.

29:28

That's it for this episode of thinking outside the box. Be sure to subscribe using your favorite podcast app so you don't miss our future episodes. See you next time.

29:38

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