

Interview with

TROY POLL

April 17, 2021

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
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TROY POLL

Troy Poll was interviewed on April 17th, 2021 by Kyle Whitesides at the BBQ Pit Stop St. George [Washington County, Utah] location. He discusses the various challenges he faced as a business owner during the pandemic years.

KW: Hello, this is Kyle Whitesides. I'm here with Troy Poll, the owner of the BBQ Pit Stop. It is April 17th [2021] and we will be discussing a couple of things about the previous year we just had here in COVID. Troy, how are you doin' today?

TP: I'm doing great. Thanks, Kyle.

KW: Absolutely. So Troy, kind of tell us a little bit about yourself: who you are, where you're from? A couple of those different things.

TP: Yeah so— We have customers.

[RECORDING PAUSED.]

KW: Sorry about that, that was a little brief intermission. We're doing this during the workday today, so we had a few customers come in. But Troy, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself.

TP: Yeah, so a lot of people ask how I got into barbecue or they'll ask, "Are you into barbecue first and then business? Or are you a businessman that just happens to barbecue?" It's tough because I'm a little bit of both. So I love barbecue, but probably my first passion really is business.

I grew up in Layton, Utah. My very first business was in fourth grade. I lived right next to my elementary school, and every day after school I would run home from school, open up my garage, and I'd have a little candy stand. And it was every day for years, that I was the kid with the candy store. That was my business and it sounds silly, but honestly, I kind of grew to love business at that point, where I thought, "This is kind of what I want to do." As I opened this candy store, then I started to learn things about inventory management and even advertising. I would set up flyers on the opposite side of the school from where I lived so I could catch the kids who walked home from both ways from school. And all these little things that I just had to naturally learn turns out super useful in everyday business—

KW: Yeah.

TP: — twenty, thirty years later. But, that's kind of when I got my start. And, as I went to school, I went into marketing. That was my major in college; I went to Weber State

University and got a business administration degree there, with a marketing emphasis. Once again, it's all kind of stepping back to my simple little candy store.

One other key point along the way was in high school, I joined a marketing class and, you know, I wouldn't necessarily say that I was, you know, into businesses at that time, going into high school. But what happened is, I took this marketing class and had a great teacher. She told me to come to a competition for it, a group named DECA [Distributive Education Clubs of America], and I went to this competition, took third place, and I started winning at subsequent competitions as the year went on. This was my sophomore year, and I ended up becoming and running for the state DECA president in high school, and I got that position. And so I was kind of both feet into business and marketing as kind of one of my favorite pastimes, even as a high school student. So that led me through college and yeah, just one thing after another from one job to the next then, I was always in that kind of business. Same thing, even sales, to me, it's all kind of part of this, the same concept of just running a business, just from different aspects of it. But I got back into really owning my own business from bottom to top when I was about twenty-eight, I guess.

KW: Awesome. Now Troy, I mean, obviously, the past year has been, to say the least, pretty interesting for everybody. I mean, originally before COVID what were you doin'? What were you doin' before COVID, probably, so about a year and a half ago, what were you up to?

TP: Okay, so I lived in Syracuse, just up in northern Utah. And we— I was in business with a, I had a business partner. We owned about seven different businesses. Two of those were barbecue stores, BBQ Pit Stop in Layton and then another one in Salt Lake [City, Utah]. And then, I also had several other product companies. I would source products overseas, some domestically; we owned, I guess, a small plastic injection molding company in northern Utah where we made different products for companies and for some of our own companies, as well. I mean, a bunch of different businesses that we had at the time.

And then there kind of came a point in my life where I was ready for a little bit of a change. One in the weather. [Laughter] I wanted to get to warmer weather as opposed to where it snowed all the time. I was sick of complaining about it, I guess. So, I said, "Alright, let's do something about this," and then we felt really good about comin' down to St. George where I wanted to live for a long time. So, we made it happen. I talked to my business partner and said, "I'm thinking about splittin' ways here." It was a big shock to him and we worked out kind of a buyout where he'd buy out my share of all these different companies, which was kind of complex with all these different companies that were involved.

Then, yeah, I sold everything, sold my house, moved down here, and bought a new house. And we started looking for a location for another BBQ Pit Stop. After several months, we finally found the right location. I started working on building it out. I got all these contractors involved and we finally had the full build-out ready, got all of our inventory, and just as we're starting to buy inventory, there's the word of this COVID

thing, that's overseas, and now it was on a cruise ship and it's creeping over. It was like nobody really knew what was gonna happen. We opened our store and we had a soft opening, and two days after our soft opening the governor shut everything down. He came in and said, "Alright, here's the regulations, you can't meet in groups larger than this." And we had a grand opening that we had planned a big event, and we paid thousands of dollars into marketing for this on the radio, and sent out mailers across the city, and then we had to cancel the event because of COVID. So all of a sudden, the start to the business was a little bit different, [laughter] to say the least, on what we had initially set out for. But yeah, so there is the last year and a half ago, I guess.

KW: Yeah. I mean, it's kind of crazy to look back. I mean, just think, like, where you've come from, especially, and what a time to start a business.

TP: Yeah.

KW: During that time period, I mean, did you ever think that it was going to get, like, that bad?

TP: Well, about, like, everybody else, no. We had no idea the scale of it, and then if it does come, it's like, "Well, we'll be done by the summer" Then the summer came and went. It was kind of interesting because everybody was kind of on this train of, "Well, it's gonna be for a little while. Hopefully by the fall—" Things got a little bit better in the summer, and then it got really bad again. And all of a sudden, you start to hear people say, like, "It's not gonna be till the next summer." And it was just, like, "What in the world?" So, from a business standpoint then, we were kind of going along with that same rollercoaster. We got hit really hard in the beginning, it kind of took all the momentum that we were hoping to gain from a grand opening and took that wind out of the sail. We had a little bit of a spike as we're getting closer to Father's Day, but then the summer was, it was kind of dead for us, honestly, it was pretty rough. And then we kind of turned a corner when we hit the fall time, I think that's because of the heat outside, people don't want to grill. But, I honestly have no idea how much of it's COVID-related and how much it's the seasonality of St. George. It's a different market than what I'm used to, even though this is my third time opening a BBQ Pit Stop, then this one is quite different from the last couple.

KW: Yeah, because, obviously, look at, like, weather patterns, too. I mean, totally, besides COVID, like, completely different places. I mean, here we get a hundred and fifteen degrees. And the hottest it gets up there, what would you say, like ninety?

TP: Well, you get a hundred, but not often!

KW: Yeah.

TP: But it'll get up there.

KW: Yeah.

- TP: So yeah, the summer is a great time to barbecue up there, by the pool. But here, then, it's not a great time, kinda hunker down a little bit.
- KW: So, what was kind of the, I guess, kind of the turning point? What did you think when you started to realize it was gonna be that bad? Like, what were kind of your thoughts goin' into that? Like, what are you gonna have to do as a business to kind of just make it through, because, obviously, especially for just startin' out, but even for like small businesses or even big businesses, there were changes that had to be made everywhere? What were you thinkin' about that?
- TP: Yeah well, one thing that never really crossed my mind was quitting [laughter] or getting out of it. That one wasn't really in my dictionary. That being said, it was in my wife's dictionary. [Both laughing.] So, she would ask, you know, like, "Are we doin' the right thing that we do this?" And it never really crossed my mind. It felt like it was the right thing at the time, even with COVID. Then I thought, "This is what we're supposed to be doin', so we're gonna stick with it." Yeah, it was rough for a little while there, and fortunately, then, you know, a lot of small businesses fail and would have failed if they weren't maybe as conservative. For somebody that's into starting businesses, like myself, I still consider myself to be somewhat conservative, and so we had, you know, a decent reserve that we had kind of planned where if we were running a little bit leaner, then the first wave to come through would've wiped us out like it did many other businesses that run, you know, a little bit too tight with their books. And so, for us, I've always had the mentality of save up, have a good cash reserve, and that'll help you storm the rainy days. You know, when the rainy days of COVID came through, then we were able to weather it. It's not what I wanted to do with the, you know, excess money.
- KW: Yeah, of course.
- TP: But that's exactly what it's there for, is to help when things are a little bit tougher. And so, we had to make a few changes here and there. I had an employee that we had hired; I hired him full-time, like right out of the gate. He was awesome, but when it got really slow, it's like, I don't need somebody working here. And they were giving out some PPP [Paycheck Protection Program] funding, which is basically the government giving money back to employers, saying thanks for keeping employees on and not firing them. And I didn't use any of that because we started our business just a few days too late to start to get that funding. So, we were too new of a business to get the funding. But yeah, anyway, we just kind of got, I don't wanna say hosed, because I also don't expect the government to come bail me out. I just wanna earn it. Not to say that all the other businesses that had taken it— but I just never felt like I got cheated out of that money. It was just like, "Well, we're gonna do this." I didn't wanna fire my employee, because I told him the same thing. I said, "I'm bringing you on. I'm making a commitment to you that I'm gonna keep you here, and so I'm going to keep you here as long as I possibly can. I think that our business is gonna turn around soon." And you know, it turned around enough we could keep him on. Then after he left, then it's the same thing for you. Then I need somebody here and that's a big commitment to hire somebody and say, "We're gonna

make sure you're taking care of even when things, you know, don't necessarily justify a second person." Then long term, then you can't grow—

KW: Yeah.

TP: — without that. And so we're trying to take a step back and say, "Alright, [it's] tough right now, but long term what's the best strategy for us?" Now we're starting to see that trend goin' the right direction.

KW: Absolutely. Yeah, it's kind of funny you kind of just mentioned that. I wasn't even looking for a job when this kind of just fell into my lap. I happened to come to a grill sale here, and I bought a grill from Troy and somethin' happened to it, and so he came and he fixed it. We started talking and I happened to become obsessed with barbecue, and he was like, "You know what, are you lookin' for a job?" That really kind of just changed my life because, I mean, during COVID, especially, I definitely needed a job, especially, to kind of help support, you know, me and my family, financially.

Kind of besides that, like Troy, I mean obviously, I feel like everyone we know has had kind of an encounter with COVID, did you or your family have COVID? I know I know the answer to this already, but just for the writing in the books.

TP: [Laughter.] Yeah, we had an encounter with COVID. [Both laugh.] So, you could say that. I was a little bit nervous around it because they were crucial times, like before I hired you, when it was— and that is exactly why I needed help, that is because what if I do get COVID, then the store closes.

KW: Yeah.

TP: I don't have an option even for your first little while at the store, and then there's training time, and, like, this is my store.

KW: Yeah.

TP: I got a lot invested in this thing, so I really can't just leave it. And so, for a while then, I just thought, "I can't. I can't get COVID." People are like, you know, there's a lot of different political aspects of that, of, you know, masks, this and that. And for me, I just thought, "Politics aside, I can't get this. I can't get this disease. If I do, it will close my business, temporarily, at least. And if customers are uncomfortable coming into the store, or whatever the case is, there are much bigger implications." Fortunately, the timing worked out pretty well, that we did get COVID— if there was such a thing as good timing to have it.

KW: Yeah. [Laughter.]

TP: Then it was closer to Christmas, which is a busy time for us for sure, but by that time I also had another part-time guy, Chris, that was helping out. And between you, Kyle, and

Chris, then you guys were able to keep things afloat while I was out for Christmas and then basically until New Year. But me, my wife, and kids, we were all kind of in that quarantine time, and so, yeah, it was nice to get back from it.

KW: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yeah, especially like you said, there's no good time to have COVID. What does help, though, is actually our next-door neighbors create the COVID test for all of— what is it— southern Utah, right?

TP: I think so, yeah. It is a pretty big territory.

KW: So it made it nice, just kind of knowin', like, we'd get pretty quick feedback, like, if we were to have it. Obviously, I'd had it previously that year, so I wasn't really too worried about it, you know, of me getting it again. But it kind of worked out, I guess. Like you said, there's no good time to have COVID, with that it was probably better timing of it.

TP: Yeah, there are no good times, but there are really bad times, and that wasn't a really bad time.

KW: Yeah.

TP: It just wasn't a good time, either.

KW: Absolutely, yeah. Okay, so your family had it, too. Did they get around the same time?

TP: Yeah, we all kind of got it together. It was a fun family event for us.

KW: It was awesome, from what I've heard. It is really good family bonding time. I mean, who likes Disneyland? [Both laugh.]

TP: Yeah, it was that kind of bonding.

KW: Yeah, absolutely.

TP: It's about like waiting in line in the heat at Disneyland with screaming kids. You could compare that to COVID, I guess

KW: Yeah, that's perfect. So, kind of going back to your family, kind of tell us about your family a little bit, obviously, you've got three— four children at home.

TP: Yep, I got a wife and four kids between the ages of two and nine, so yeah, girl, boy, girl, boy. Yeah, [they are a] young, active, energetic family.

KW: Yeah.

TP: They just barely made a move to a place where we didn't have family or, really, friends down here. It was just kind of this blind move with all of them. But the kids were really

good, they're quite resilient, and so making new friends and doing that was pretty quick for them, except, you know, they weren't allowed to go to friends' houses for a while, and they had to wear masks at school. So it was a little bit difficult socially, but the kids did a lot better than, you know, parents, probably, are able to do.

KW: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Your kids, that's kind of like a really interesting time to be a kid, 'cause, you know, when we were kids we didn't have to worry about deadly diseases goin' around the country and the world. [Laughter.] So, not really a huge worry for us—

It looks like we've got a customer coming in, so we're gonna take another brief intermission and we'll be right back with just the last couple questions.

[RECORDING PAUSED.]

Alright after a little short intermission, we are back. Sorry about that everybody, we were just having to help with a few different customers.

So Troy, kind of like lookin' into this, obviously, like we've talked about previously throughout this entire interview, COVID was a crazy year for all of us. What have you kind of learned from COVID, like in a business standpoint? Then also, what would you take with you from what you've learned, so like smaller class sizes, would you want to do that later on? Because we teach classes on how to barbecue, and things like that. What would you take away from what you've learned throughout COVID?

TP: Okay. Well, yeah, hopefully everybody that's gone through COVID'll have an opportunity to reflect and learn for yourself. Sometimes there are personal lessons, sometimes there's bigger business-applicable lessons. I think of a lot of businesses that didn't make it, and like I mentioned before, always be ready for a rainy day, and sometimes those rainy days last a year. There's a million things that could go wrong, COVID just was one of the many. It could be a recession, you know, it could be a different type of disaster, but there's always stuff that can come up, and so it was a reminder that we always need to be financially prepared, but also ready to pivot as a business. We had to make some changes on how we were advertising, or how we were contacting customers because the normal ways that we've used before just weren't working. One example of that is, we do a lot of advertising through sports radio. It's been a really good demographic for us, and so we started advertising with the local sports radio channel, COVID hit, and sports were canceled [laughter]. Nobody's listening to sports, so sports radio meant nothing. Talking about all the different things, but nobody wants to listen to it. So we had to pay it, [but] we found a different radio station— more people were listening to talk radio news at that time, so we switched over from sports and we went to news radio, and had really good success. That hasn't historically been successful for us, but ever since COVID happened, then that's been a much better play for us. So if there's a change, you can complain about it, but you can also make adjustments along the way. Our classes, then, we talked about canceling them. For a while, we couldn't, we for sure couldn't do any classes. As soon as the health department gave us permission at some point, where we were able to do classes with limited numbers and we would have

to take a few extra precautions along the way, we did those, and we're starting to grow those class sizes a little bit now. When you get a curveball, then you just gotta make an adjustment, and if you don't make adjustments, then you look for a new job. [Laughter.]

KW: Alright, kind of just wrapping this whole entire idea up, and this conversation up. For the people who are listening to this, you know, whether that's ten years, fifty years, whatever it is, if we're long gone, what are a couple of pieces of advice that you've kind of learned through COVID, or maybe even in life, that you would like the next generation to know?

TP: [Sighs.] That's a deep question! [Laughter.] What's the next level, so I can go on and on, you know. Pick a lesson, because they've come plentiful [laughter] over this last year. But for me, I've had to stand by my instincts a number of different times. Which obviously, from moving down here at all and giving up everything that I knew from before, selling it all off and starting kind of a new chapter of life here. I had to really stand by the fact that I thought that was a good idea. There comes a point for other businesses too, where you have to know when to quit. So, that's a really tough kind of Catch-22 situation, where when is it, you know, time to cut and just get out, versus, you know, when do you say, "Let's buckle down and keep going." And for me, because this is my third location, I've done two other stores and those have been quite successful, the other stores, that I knew the business concept was already proven. I didn't have fear about, "Well, are people gonna like barbecue?" It's not a brand-new idea, it's just kind of a new market. I've already tested the exact same concept out, and so I didn't really have a fear of— I just hope that people will support this kind of a store. So, having that in my back pocket really helped a lot.

So, dealing with the ins and outs of COVID then, sometimes you just need to take a step backward and say, "I need to look at the bigger picture here." And the bigger picture is, "Yeah, sometimes I have a tough week or a tough month at the store. But, the bigger picture is, is this still a good business concept? Looking past COVID, putting COVID aside, is this still a good business concept?" And because I have that experience with the other stores, then yeah, it's a good business concept and it's going to do better and better as we get further and further away from whatever the current situation is. Right now, it's a pandemic, but if it was a recession, it would be the same deal. I'd have to pivot, I'd have to make adjustments as a business, but it's still a good business concept.

So, not making knee-jerk reaction decisions is, yeah, key to business, it's key to life. When you want to make a reaction based off of how you feel that day, some days, they suck. [Both laugh.] It's not— they're just bad days, with whatever it is you're going through. Maybe that's sports, or maybe that's school, or whatever it is. But, if you take a step back and say, "The big picture, is this still a good plan?" I think taking that perspective helps you through those tough days or weeks, and helps you reevaluate. Sometimes you look back and you think, "This is still a really bad idea." Like, if it's been a tough week and you look back and say, "I don't like the direction this is taking me," maybe that's when you make other decisions, to say, "Let's cut ties with whatever it is that we're working on." Fortunately for us, that hasn't been the case. I think exactly the opposite, I think we are going in a great direction and we'll see long sustained growth in

the industry. But, not every business idea is a long-term winner, and I've had those before, too. Sometimes you have to know when to say bye-bye, and when to hold tight and grit your teeth a little bit, and work through it.

KW: Absolutely, those are some awesome words. So even business majors down the line, listen up. That was some really good advice, just to take along with you for your entire career and journey you're gonna have within the business industry. Well, again, I just want to say thank you again, for listening in and tunin' in. Thank you, Troy, for being here.

TP: Absolutely.

KW: So again, this is Kyle Whitesides, and this has been Troy Poll, and we've just been havin' a great ol' interview. Thank you so much for listening and until next time.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]