Podcast Episode #58 – Freedom to work and play anywhere without losing power, with Nancy de Fays of Linedock, USA

RAW TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

Balint: Thanks, Nancy, for joining the show, that you could set aside some time for this record to happen as these days, especially these days, you're super busy because of the first flash sale you're going to have in just a couple of days. So thanks again.

Nancy: Thank you. Thank you very much, Balint. I'm very excited to have this interview. I think it's been some time we've been exchanging about it. Finally, it's happening now.

Balint: I am really glad about it. We got connected last year, actually I think it was last summer around July or August something like that when you met Steve Wozniak, one of the Apple co-founders apparently, who liked your product. You were ecstatic about his reaction. It's like a year passed by since then. We wanted to have this interview for some time now and we were in contact since then which I really appreciate because I could get some info about the evolution of your idea. At that time I remember that you had this compliment, if I might say, that you're listening to the podcast to get energized, to overcome some of the ups and downs but especially the downs, down moments.

Nancy: Yes. That's true. Well, I mean as you know I like to describe our job as a firefighting job so our job is trying to make sure that the house is not too much on fire because we have limited resources, limited small team so you're always kind of trying to figure out how to make things right with you know not enough time, not enough cash, not enough people. So yeah, it was definitely a very, very busy year. I am very happy to see the end of the beginning.

Balint: The fruits.

Nancy: Yeah, the fruits, the very first fruits that are almost fresh. So yeah, we are going to be starting selling next week, Tuesday. That's going to be very exciting. So I don't know if you are familiar with the flash sale type of thing?

Balint: No, no. But I would say we can jump into this topic a little bit later. I would love to hear you know also some of the other marketing activities that you have and

of course about the whole business that you're building up. I just wanted to share first perhaps to start this episode with a story, the personal story of mine.

So as we discussed it I love traveling privately, both privately and professionally and I'm also a heavy user of electronics while traveling. I have a MacBook Air and some other electronics. I don't have a drone but I have all the other stuff like you know Air-Pods, the iPhone, the MacBook Air and other Apple products. So typically, I go wrong with an unlimited data plan with 4G, soon with 5G connection, especially here in Switzerland where I live and also in Europe many people because of the roaming you know going away in Europe they can go around and become more independent, location independent. And this way one can work privately and professionally doing some activities with all electronics in principle but this is not so straightforward that this can also happen to get juice electronic you know juice for all your devices to power them. So this is why I'm excited to have this interview because I'm excited about these topics, about these potentials for activities. But until now this has not been really possible, I believe.

Nancy: Yes, that's true. So I actually used to work myself as a consultant. And the way the project actually started for us is that so Quentin had this kind of hackathon hardware concept on his desk and his idea was to combine a hard drive and a power bank. So his cousin happened to have thrown her old MacBook in the swimming pool so the computer was completely dead and the carcass was still usable so he was like, "Well, I mean it's such a pity to not be able to have something that look as good as a computer and that would also combine two main essentials that we need really on a daily basis which is power and storage.

So it really actually started like this and I was actually consulting at that time so I was traveling a lot. I was working in Paris, I was living in Belgium and then one day for some reason I happened to leave my charger in Brussels. So arrive at my client in Paris, I had a super important presentation and so I turned on my computer and I didn't have my charger. And that was the end of the day so I was like, "Okay, well, thank you very much for your attention. I think I'll see you again next week." So, of course, I sent everything through mail but that's when I decided to go back to Quentin and like, "Well, you know I think your idea of you know this like trying combination of raw power and storage could be interesting. I'm sure there would be people who would buy it and me first." And so that's kind of how we started working on this project.

At that time also was the beginning of the USB-C. So the USB-C protocol started somewhere in 2015-2016. And the first computer that was released at that time was the MacBook 12 inch. So it was not a very powerful computer but that was one of the first that could integrate such protocol. So we thought, OK, well that could be interest-

ing. Let's see because the USB-C seems pretty promising. They really want to combine power and data in one single port. So there is kind of a trend or a movement from the industry towards something that is integrated so let's try to study this protocol, see how power delivery is working, etc. So that took us about probably about 6 months. That's when I decided to quit my job and to join Quinten full spin on this project. And then yeah, we started the development. We had our first electrical engineers. And this is how it all started.

Balint: Let me expand a little bit more on the USB-C. You started talking about it. What was the status until now regarding the availability of power banks that can power especially laptops. We have power banks we're used to the concept for using it together with smartphones. But what about the more power-hungry devices?

Nancy: So usually a computer requires quite a lot of power. There are actually two different things that are available in the market today. They are really what you can call a power bank so it can be a power bank in USB-C or in regular USB and these ones can usually support anywhere between 15 up to 45 watts of power. I think the most powerful one right now is the one from Razer which is a pretty heavy one but then you can connect your computer directly into that power break without recurring your charger. So that's what I call a power bank. You also have the power bricks that are usually bigger that just have a few piles of cells like you would find in the old remote controllers I would say, and then you also need your charger. So basically, you're carrying around a big heavy brick plus your charger just to have enough juice to get to go through the day.

So what we wanted to do when we saw the first USB-C laptops being released and the first power banks that were actually not very efficient we thought, "OK, let's try to stick with the original plan of USBC which was to make things easier." So we want to have a device that will figure out what the other device means in terms of power and we'll just provide whatever that device needs. So we decided to really hack the entire protocol I would say to allow for up to a hundred watt of charging which is the maximum output supported by the protocol and then basically there was just a handshake between our device and between the device that requires power. They're just like talking to each other like you would be imagining two humans, "Oh, what kind of power do you need?, "Oh, I support this, this and that.", "OK, fine. Well, then I'll just give you that amount of power and that's it." So the user doesn't have to push any button or use any specific port left or right, it's completely seamless.

Balint: And how do you differentiate this idea compared to what's available, what was available on the market at that time and what's available now?

Nancy: Well, the market hasn't changed that much since then. I would say that in terms of charging what we really wanted to do is have something extremely powerful.

We haven't seen that many extra power banks released since then. I think the most powerful one was the one of Razer that was announced almost two years ago and only released last year if I'm not mistaken. So competition is available on the market. We've seen tremendous amount of power banks that are claiming to provide USB-C but then when you start diving into the specifications, you're like, "Okay, this is actually only able to charge a phone" or you can charge your computer but it's going to take like eight or ten hours. I mean the market hasn't evolved that much in that direction. In terms of advantages compared to what's existing. I would say it's really about the integration. So people who have purchased the product today are literally saying, "Okay, well I now have one device that can do many different things that in the past required me to have at least five or six different devices." So going beyond the charging we kind of see that as a standalone device that can provide a different type of features and advantages on top of power.

Balint: This is a little bit in connection with what you said in one of your descriptions that you want to be dongle free, right? So you want to reduce the number of cables.

Nancy: Yes, as well. Right now we really wanted to…. This is our very first product and as you know our hardware is hard so we kind of wanted to stick with some very essentials, our basic features which are charging, you basically want to charge and fast, you want to connect to whatever you want and you want to store data. Then of course we have tons of other ideas and implementations so both looking at hardware features but also software integration that we're now starting to dig into which is extremely exciting. So yes, that was kind of for us to the first generation. And then of course we have quite a few exciting things along the way.

Balint: All right. You mentioned simple product, you refer to your product as a simple product. How did you come to this simple product? Was it a simple process that you followed? You mentioned that hardware is hard. I was wondering that you mentioned also at the beginning that after six months you left your position as a consultant and you started working more full time on this project. What were more or less the steps that you followed in terms of prototypes? And how does the crowdfunding come into the picture? So at what stage did you decide that you would do crowdfunding?

Nancy: I think we're probably one of the worst example to follow. Because I mean we really started from scratch. I feel like today if you look at the hardware industry, I mean the biggest companies they are usually run by way more experienced people, they have way bigger teams and we were two, we're still two today. So the way I would see is that we kind of started with a proof of concept. So we managed to hack something that looked extremely ugly but that could at least demo very quickly the main features that we wanted to integrate. So that was actually after a few months. And once we had that we started to develop the PCB which is kind of the printed cir-

cuit board which is what took us probably the most time. And then you also have to study all kind of materials that you want to work with. Do you want to work with the aluminum enclosure or plastic enclosure, etcetera. Then what about the battery itself right? Because the battery interestingly enough, the battery itself is I mean not much of a challenge in the entire product. The hard part is really about the hardware and the circuitry itself and the software.

So I would say we started the crowdfunding when we had a proof of concept, when we had a kind of a proof that the concept and the features we wanted to integrate were possible. Interestingly enough we launched our crowdfunding campaign that at that time there were actually quite a few chipsets that were using today that were not existing at that time. So it was kind of a challenge for us to see if the market would go into that direction because when we launched there was only the 12 inch MacBook that was available and the 13 inch first generation of MacBook Pro was just released like one week after our campaign was launched. So it was I would say a very, very big challenge that we took. And then moving forward from the moment we started the crowdfunding all the way to now, well that's where the hard work starts because I mean it's great to have an idea, you have a prototype, like things seem to work but then you need to make something that is production ready or that is scalable ready, that is reliable after six months, after one year, after five years and that's usually where you lose quite a few hairs.

Balint: You went for the Indiegogo platform. What were some of the factors that played a role? Why not going and doing Kickstarter?

Nancy: Well, I think that was quite of a coincidence. I happened to be in San Francisco. There was a meetup organized that I think the title was *How to Raise One Million on Indiegogo* and we were right about you know starting to prepare these crowdfunding things and we were like, "Oh, yeah, maybe we should go there. That seems quite interesting." And this is where I had the chance to meet with Sandy, Sandy Diao whose gross director at Indiegogo who was extremely friendly.

Balint: Who I interviewed as well.

Nancy: Yes. And so she just happened to you know give us an interview and devote some time to help us out which I really appreciated. So I think for us it was pretty straightforward. We were like OK, well, here we have a platform where they are checking the product, they are going through you know like the step by step to build a crowdfunding campaign. They're extremely supportive. They really work with you so yeah, I mean for us it was pretty obvious to go for Indiegogo over Kickstarter.

Balint: Yeah. I had this interview at that time with Sandy. And she did talk about these. It's great to see these that they did happen in practice.

Nancy: Yes. No, it really happens.

Balint: Amazing. She also mentioned at that time Arrow certified and I saw it also in your campaign that you were Arrow certified, right?

Nancy: Yes. That's also one of the great advantage of Indiegogo is that they really try to team up with either manufacturing or components manufacturer partners to kind of make the job of the founders a little bit easier which is nice.

Balint: So I guess it's good both for the founders and also for the backers on these platforms because the backers can see that you have been checked, audited for manufacturability.

Nancy: Yes, yes, of course. I think this is a pretty good point. I think that it's probably one of the biggest challenge of any campaigner is to try to keep as much as possible the backers in the loop. As I told you, hardware is extremely hard and it's a very technical project so sometimes it's kind of hard to go through every single step that we're doing on a daily basis or a weekly basis. And so, people sometimes are wondering what's happening after I don't know two three or six months of delay. So I think that in a very early stage phase I do think that these certifications can be helpful for the founders but also for the backers to you know see that OK, well the product has been verified or there was a team who spent some time going through the technical specification and it seems legit.

Balint: Talking about the one million-dollar talk that you attended, you did reach a quite high level of crowdfunding success. Can you also talk about that? How that happened? If it surprised you. What you felt when the numbers were going up that high?

Nancy: Well, I mean actually it was quite a big surprise. We were really not expecting that. The budget or the marketing budget was pretty much close to zero when we launched. And any expert in crowdfunding or in marketing would typically advise you to look at I would say I don't know anywhere between 25 to 50 k, to have like a comfortable budget to start with. And we had nothing, we had just close our first seed round and so we had a very, very limited budget. We also had to pay for you know setting up the first company, start paying for prototypes, go through the entire study of the protocol. So anyway, we had like way other priorities in marketing at that time. So we started with like nothing and we were like, Okay, well this is us. This is what you can pay. Hey, do you want to check it out?" So yeah, it was definitely exciting to see the numbers growing after few days.

The beginning was I think very tough because we happened to launch when Apple had just released their MacBook in USB-C. And that was actually very badly received

because then people were like, "Oh, so Apple is removing all the parts and you guys are bringing them back with a device that looks like a computer" which just happened to be coincidence because at that time, well, we were just launching, we indeed had a port because it was indeed a docking station. But Apple released their computer at the same time. So we were like, "Yeah, well no. Yes and no, not exactly." So yeah, it was definitely challenging but exciting at the same time.

Balint: In spite of it you could pull it off quite nicely.

Nancy: Yes.

Balint: What was the absolute number that you could get? I think it would be good for the listeners to hear about that. What were some of the key steps, you know actions that you took to make it happen in spite of the very limited marketing budget?

Nancy: I mean we didn't do anything special. First was actually to shoot a good video and try to have a compelling pitch which in our case was not easy because we were doing many different things at the same time. It's a bit like trying to sell you know a new type of swiss knife. You like oh, and you can also cut the meat and it can do this and it can do that. So for people if it's a new product sometimes it's very difficult to grasp at once what is the main unique selling proposition. So I think that's definitely something we totally failed at the beginning. And then the press also was a pretty bad because we actually didn't think of reaching out to journalists one month before launch or two three weeks before launch. We just launched the campaign and we were like, "Oh, OK, now maybe we should reach out to journalists. OK, let's really write an email real quick." And we were like, "Hey, this is the product. Do you want to you know cover it?" So I think for any entrepreneur who is thinking of running a crowdfunding campaign I would say plan in advance because things never go as expected and things take usually five to 10 more times than what you plan on paper.

Balint: As Eisenhower said it once, "A plan is useless but planning is indispensable."

Nancy: Yes, I mean that's a pretty good summary of our entire project up till now. We continue planning on a daily, monthly, weekly basis even if we fail meeting every single deadline, I do think that planning is definitely crucial especially if you're launching a new product.

Balint: Staying a little bit more with the crowdfunding campaign. Do you think that InDemand feature by Indiegogo played some role?

Nancy: Well, I think so but you also think that you know with any new product introduction there is what people call the momentum. So it's really the moment where I don't know you are in this I think very positive spiral. People like the product, people talk about it and that usually happen very early in the stage. So that's typically when

you just launch. And InDemand is I think a very good way to try to keep this momentum last a bit longer. But I would say that the most of your campaign is usually happening during your campaign so during the first few days but InDemand is definitely is definitely helpful.

Balint: So I think it's still amazing that being ultra-lean you could manage to get so much funding so again congrats to that.

Nancy: Thank you.

Balint: The number was, I'm not sure if you said it already, it's something like 400 K, right?

Nancy: Yes. For 450 or something.

Balint: Yeah, amazing. So what were some of the challenges of bringing the product to this stage, some of the hardware challenges like sourcing of components, manufacturing? You know you said that it's been difficult to keep the deadlines, the milestones but still you have a product right now.

Nancy: Well, I think the hard part when you build hardware is to become aware that when you have like 90 percent of the job done you still have 90 percent that needs to be delivered. And that's sometimes very frustrating because you're like, "Okay, well it works, the product works now so why can we just you know mass produce it? Now everything is running, we know which chipsets we're going to be using, which electronic components for this, this and that. So that's it. Right?" And actually, this is where production come in the game in the know that you have some molding, you have some tooling, you have some certifications, you have quality control and compliance reports to prepare and you have all kind of instructions that you need to give to the factory because I mean a factory is a factory so you are the one who us supposed to know you know how the product needs to be assembled, what are the tolerances that you accept if, I don't know, you have five units out of 100 that have zero point, zero two millimeters difference. Is it acceptable or not? Etc. So those things just happen and at once while you actually think that you know the product is ready so people can soon receive it, well, it's actually not the case. And then I would say manufacturing in itself is definitely a challenge and I really do see why so many companies waste quite a few months fighting with manufacturing. In our case components sourcing was a very big challenge because we were working with very, very innovative chipsets. As I told you when we started the campaign some chipsets were actually not even existing.

I remember going to Munich for the electronic airfare that was in November 2016 and I was at the booth of microchip. And they were actually introducing the new USB

powered delivery chipsets that were to be released later that year early 2017. So if you're working with very innovative chipsets, sometimes you do have to realize that there are other companies that are in the waiting line before you can be Microsoft, can be Apple, ASUS that order way bigger quantities so sometimes the wait time can go all the way to 40-45 weeks and if you're not prepared for that at the beginning, well, you start ordering your components, you reach out to all the Texas Instruments and alike and then they give you back a quotation with a wait time and you're like, "Oh, shit. I have to wait until next year. What do I do now?"

So sourcing I would say is definitely challenge and then certifications also. For us that was very complex. Every time you're charging to anything that contains batteries that's quite of a challenge to have it certified. And it also takes a lot of time. If you happen to have a new radio emission so if you have something that has antennas that's also a nightmare to get certified. So yeah, I would say there hasn't been anything that went fine.

Balint: Smoothly.

Nancy: Yes, but we made it. You have a couple of innovations in your device. What would you identify as the main innovations like USB-C that you have that's one of the main propositions? But you have the you know active cooling and some of the software features that you've identified and you want to work on that even more.

Balint: I think power delivery or at least the performance of the device itself when it comes to power is that we wanted the innovation. I think in general it's really about the seamless integration of different features. For instance, you know if you look at USB 3 today there are quite a few devices that support Qualcomm quick charge. Then if you want to have very fast data, you can also go for USB 3.0 basically which is just I think 5 gigabits per second or something. And so, we thought okay, well how about just trying to have one USB port that could do both instead of having one that says Qualcomm quick charge and the other that says USB 3? That's for instance an innovation we did so that people have only one single port that can either fast charge or provide very fast data transfer depending on if a laptop is connected to it or not.

And so we do a lot of different things like that that we did to just try to make things easy again. And yeah, I would say that's probably one of the biggest advantage. Looking at the cooling feature. Yes, of course this is coming in the 15-inch version that we do provide and that's going to be released if everything goes well somewhere in September. And for that yes, the cooling is definitely quite a big innovation we brought into the product.

Balint: I see you worked on quite a lot of things at the same time concurrently and you bring out these features to the market at different times. What did the crowdfunding campaign help you identify in terms of feedback from the customers?

Nancy: Well, I think crowdfunding is probably one of the only place where you can interact and engage with people that are extremely dedicated to new tech, that are willing to help, that want to share their feedback, that really want to spend some time helping you out which is I think almost non-existent in this world today where everyone is busy. So I think crowdfunding is fantastic when you can talk with people, when you can ask about, "Oh, what do you think of that feature? Do you think that will be interesting?" And those people actually are usually very, very knowledgeable.

I remember when we launched the first Facebook ads we had super, super techy people, guys who were working at like NASA. There were scientists challenging the cooling system in X, Y, Z situation so those people were extremely knowledgeable and I would say it's fantastic for someone that is starting and that doesn't want you know to go with a paper and a survey and walk in the street and ask random people, I think it's really fantastic to be able to ask people who actually know about it, who are actively engaging in tech, who always buy the latest devices. It's really fantastic to test. So I would say first the features but also the price point. That's also a very good opportunity with crowdfunding you can test different prices with different perks and say, "Okay well, we see that's a price people are willing to pay for X, Y, Z feature. But if we increase the price by that amount ,then we see a pretty big drop in the sales so maybe we should try to keep the price within that range and that range." So yeah, I mean I don't have any bad thing to say about crowdfunding when it comes to launching a new program what you can get from the people.

Balint: Yeah. So you would definitely advise startups especially in the consumer space that they should to go this route for iterating.

Nancy: I think so. I think one experience that I do want to share is try to launch when you're really ready. We've had a very tiny team. I mean I don't think we can have any smaller team than the one we have right now. I think we could have waited maybe a little bit before launching. So I think people are sometimes very excited and are, "Okay, well, I do want to launch now" but sometimes it's better to wait and have something that is a bit more mature, maybe wait until you have a bit more budget as well because well, it's a long way for people. So your job is definitely not done once you have closed your campaign. This is actually where everything is turning. So I would say yeah, don't rush it too much. Make sure you are really fully ready before launching.

Balint: What are some of the next steps you are going to take besides shipping and besides the sales?

Nancy: Well, I mean it's you know it's an endless journey. So once you're done with your first generation, then you're actually you're really starting working on the iteration of that current product. So right now we are in generation I would say the V 1.0, then we are of course looking at the 1.1., 1.2 because you always have things that you can improve and you can also look at either improving the current features or add new features or I don't know and enhance experience. So I would say that's one. We also have the 15 inch that is coming along the way later this year so we are so pretty busy with that one too. And then we also have new products that we are starting to work on so we're never not busy.

Balint: Can't wait to look at the new products coming out. So that is the ultrafast round of questions that I would like to now move the conversation to. Which means that I would ask four questions and it would be great if I could get relatively short answers to these. All right. Ready?

Nancy: Yes.

Balint: If you could go back in time like in the movie Back to the Future to the time when you were at the beginning of your 20s what notes would you give yourself?

Nancy: Good question. I don't know. So I guess it means you would not give a note to yourself perhaps.

Nancy: I don't think so.

Balint: Yeah. Maybe it's better to keep it like that, to keep the history unchanged.

Nancy: Yes.

Balint: All right. Second question. If you had to name a book, which one had the biggest impact on your entrepreneur your thinking?

Nancy: It's a book in French. It's called *The Four Agreements*.

Balint: OK. That sounds interesting. Maybe you could send me later the link to it so I can put it into the show notes, especially for the French speaking listeners.

Nancy: OK.

Balint: And what is it about?

Nancy: So it's a list of agreements or I would say life rules that say don't make any assumptions, always do your best, don't take anything personally, be impeccable with your word. So those are just mantras or life principles that I find very interesting.

Balint: OK. All right. Pretty good. Again, to overcome challenges these are good to keep in mind. The third question I'm amazed by habits that they can help us reach out our goals because we can work more efficiently and operate more efficiently. So do you have some habits in private life or during your work?

Nancy: Yes I would start to go for a run in the morning if I'm not too tired. I think that's probably one of the best way to start your day is try to have some activity early in the morning before diving into your tons of mails and phone calls. Yes.

Balint: Every morning?

Nancy: I try every other day for now.

Balint: Good, good. Pretty good. The last question. In your work if you had to pick one or two critical cultural difference which you had to overcome, which ones would those be?

Nancy: I would say never take no for an answer. That's something you typically see from one culture into another and no means very different things. So I would say that's definitely something we overcome but we really had issues with dealing with dealing with China, Ukraine, Denmark, U.S., that can be challenging.

Balint: To interpret these no's?

Nancy: Yes.

Balint: Interesting. Yeah. I never thought about that. So for example, in case of China how would you approach that?

Nancy: For China, I think it's a very specific situation is that you kind of have to push step by step I would say. You know the European way of doing business is very transactional. You know it's "Can you do this? Yes. No. OK. By when?" Well, you know deal is done after a few exchange so it's very binary type of logic so it's 0, 1, yes, no. I think the Asian way of doing business is much more dynamic. So if someone says "no", at some point it doesn't mean that tomorrow he or she will think OK, well, it's still a no. Someone said a continuous dance around negotiation that includes a "yes" at some point, a "no" at some point as well.

Balint: Yeah, that's something to keep in mind for sure.

Nancy: Yes.

Balint: Pretty important. So now that we reached the end of the interview after the ultrafast round, I have one last question which is your reachability. How are you best reachable - by e-mail or by social media, especially for the listeners?

Nancy: E-mail. Yeah, I try to reply as soon as possible but I would say e-mail or phone call might be the easiest option.

Balint: All right. And what is your e-mail?

Nancy: My e-mail is nancy@linedock.co.

Balint: Very good. So again, I appreciate the conversation that we could have right now. I think it's amazing the journey how passionate you are about your product and in my eyes you make it as close to an Apple product as possible.

Nancy: Thank you. Thank you very much, Balint.