

Building a Business with Northeastern's Tools featuring Sage Antonio

Music: Enters

Tommy: Welcome back to another episode of "Northeastern Next." On today's episode, we have Sage Antonio, the founder of Sageware Fashion. We will discuss their entrepreneurial journey, how the Northeastern Entrepreneurial system helped them grow their business, and their unique co-op opportunity. Let's get into it.

Music: Fades.

Tommy: Alright, hello, Sage! How are you today? Thanks for joining us on the "Northeastern Next Podcast."

Sage: Yeah, of course! I was just going to say I listened to a bunch of your episodes earlier this week and they were good.

Tommy: Oh, I hope you gave me the five stars on Spotify or wherever.

Sage: Yeah.

Tommy: No, I'm kidding.

Sage: Yeah, good ratings. Yeah, for sure!

Tommy: Yeah, I have rated myself as many times as you can rate yourself on that, which is only once. But where am I talking to you from today?

Sage: Back home in Western Mass.

Tommy: Western? Nice.

Sage: Yeah, I am just home for a month and then I go back to Boston.

Tommy: Nice, that's really exciting! So, again, thanks for much for joining us for the "Northeastern Next Podcast," today. I am really happy that you decided to join, I'm really happy that we are going to be able to sit here and be able to talk about your Northeastern experience. Then, I am definitely going to take a dive into Sageware Fashion, right? Is that the correct way to say it?

Sage: Yeah, sometimes I call it Sageware, sometimes I call it Sageware Fashion. It's called Sageware Fashion because when I started on Etsy, Sageware wasn't available, so I added "Fashion" at the end. So, I kept putting it on my merch but now that I have an official domain, it's just Sageware.com...

Tommy: I imagine you probably have grown a little bigger than whoever had that original handle, right?

Sage: Yeah, I still can't get it on Etsy for some reason. Even though that store hasn't been active in like ten years.

Tommy: Yeah, I don't know what it is about some of these social media companies that just like, when somebody has a handle, they will not let go of it. I don't get it.

Sage: I will just call it Sageware Fashion half the time, Sageware half the time.

Tommy: Well, it rolls off the tongue either way. Before we get into that, I would love to talk about your Northeastern experience in general. So, I remember in our preliminary phone call you were telling me about a really exciting co-op experience. Can you tell us a little about the co-op in general, your relation to it, and just...I don't know just how much about the co-op you would like to share with us.

Sage: I mentioned to you that I will be on the Sherman co-op in a month. Though that is my first co-op.

Tommy: Nice!

Sage: It is rare that it's someone's first co-op. I am very proud of that.

Tommy: Well, what is the Sherman co-op?

Sage: It is run by the Sherman Center. So, they choose five or six ventures each semester that will get funding from the school—so it is basically like they are paying you to have a full-time job. But, instead of doing work for someone else, you are doing work for yourself. So, I know it's not a grant but when people do not know what it is, I call it like a business grant because it's like a nice way of supporting your business. It's run by Theo, he's great. I've met a few of the other ventures though I don't know a ton so far so if some of this is wrong...I don't know because I just have been in the Sherman Center a few times so far and I'm not a business student so I don't know too much but I have done a lot of business and gone to a lot of events there.

Tommy: Oh, cool! So, this ties all the way back to Sageware Fashion and everything?

Sage: Yeah. That's kind of how I figured out about it because I texted one of my friends that is a business major and I was like, "I want to use some of the resources here but I'm not a business student, so I don't know where to start." And, he sent me over to another person who was running IDEA at the time and then she got me connected with a bunch of other places and IDEA is a part of the Sherman Center, it's part of the Mosaic, which is the all-encompassing group that all the entrepreneurship clubs like Generate and WISE and IDEA and a bunch of those. And after that I joined WISE and so I feel like I have a good experience in that group but there is so much to it, like I definitely don't know everything about the business ecosystem of Northeastern yet but I'm getting there. I'm going to as many events as I can and networking.

Tommy: Yeah, Northeastern's entrepreneurial ecosystem is unbelievable. It's crazy how vast it is. You know, not just Boston-based businesses but businesses around the country. Entrepreneurship is definitely a foundational piece of the university's...what's the word?

Sage: Oh, like slogan? No, that's not the word.

Tommy: Like, a principle?

Sage: I remember on my first college tour, they were like, "Oh, there is a co-op where you can work for yourself." And I remember being like, "Oh, that's going to be my end-goal. I'm going to do that as my last co-op." And I'm doing it for my first co-op.

Tommy: And you are doing it for your very first. That's awesome!

Sage: Ahead of schedule.

Tommy: Well, going back to the entrepreneurial ecosystem [of Northeastern], I think that is the, believe it or not, we didn't realize it at the time, but we did meet in person for the Valentine's Day Market this past February, right?

Sage: Yeah, I think so! I probably saw you, but I also saw like a gazillion people so don't be mad if I didn't say hi.

Tommy: I'm sure, I mean from your perspective, I'm sure you talked to probably a thousand people that day. You know?

Sage: Yeah.

Tommy: So, I guess my question for you before we talk about the market and ecosystem just, let's go all the way back to the beginning. The origin of Sageware Fashion. What was the inspiration behind that?

Sage: Okay, yeah, I was just thinking about it earlier today like, "How am I going to explain all the backstory?" But I will just do the little...6 years ago, back in eighth grade, that's when it all began. I remember I really liked building stuff, and I was very entranced by the idea of the spy gear stuff, so I wanted to build something like this—hear me out, it ties into earrings eventually. So, I had this idea for a hair stick that would have a hidden tool inside so like women on the go, they can have a screwdriver. You use it to put up a bun, a lot of people don't know what it is. So, I made one out of a stick and old screwdriver I had, I made this in eighth grade, then forgot about it for like a few years, it was just lying around. And then, when COVID hit, I was like, "Oh, I wanted to start a business for a long time, the idea was to always start it after high school but I don't have classes, I don't have anything going on, and if I don't find a project soon, I'm going to go insane." So, I found my old hair stick and I was like, "What if I just made a bunch more of these and just sold them."

So, from there, I saved up, I got myself a lathe from Harbor Freight...I got a bunch of materials from Amazon, and so I started making these and that's the reason I started my Etsy, because of these hair stakes. And so, I sold those for a bit. A few of them sold, they didn't actually sell that well, but I already had a store, so I was like, "Oh, I want to make some more earrings and do more fashionable function which is the hair stick." So, I did these rolls of tape earrings so there like little rolls of skinny washi-tape but they're also earrings and you can use them. Though the issue I found with those two products was that they take a lot of explaining so it's hard to sell them. They sell better in person to like friends and family. But I still wanted to take this business further and so I kept coming up with earring ideas while I was playing Lego Star Wars with my sister, I got the idea for these Lego stud stud earrings...

Tommy: Oh, ok!

Sage: Because you collect them in the Lego games. Then the book earrings which are doing super well right now. I don't know where that idea came from but once I made them customizable, that's when it really skyrocketed. There was a point in my junior year of high school where I was getting like 20 orders a day.

Tommy: Oh, wow!

Sage: It was insane!

Tommy: So, you were really running this full-time.

Sage: Yeah! For some reason, I think the best it did was in junior year of high school because—I'm piecing it together now—everyone was shopping online so much.

Tommy: Yeah.

Sage: I haven't seen that sort of success online since then.

Tommy: This was on your Etsy storefront?

Sage: Mhm! I got the Shopify literally last month. So, everything was Etsy until this point.

Tommy: And that's on your new domain...just for the people listening, what's the name of it?

Sage: You can check out Sageware.shop and its S-A-G-E-W-A-R-E because that was the only domain that was available.

Tommy: Oh, that's funny. I like that.

Sage: Well, also it's related to hardware.

Tommy: Right.

Sage: Because the original hair stick. So, a lot of them were tied to the original hair stick which I unfortunately don't sell anymore because it took me hours to make one and they sell for twenty at most. I might bring them back. Since I will be running my business full-time next semester...

Tommy: You should!

Sage: I might try to find a way to make it for cheaper. Instead of...

Tommy: I think that is a really cool idea! You know, having something in your hair stick like a screwdriver. I mean you never know, honestly.

Sage: You can fit a bunch of stuff in there. I had like pens in there...

Tommy: Oh, that's smart.

Sage: ...and you can just pop them open and pull the two sides apart. I also had these foam flowers on top. I want to do something a little fancier than that.

Tommy: So, if the hair sticks out, I remember seeing your table at the market, you kind of have a lot of earrings and jewelry. Is that fair to say?

Sage: It's pretty much just earrings right now.

Tommy: Just earrings now? So, what was the pivot there towards earrings?

Sage: To be honest, I always made earrings. If you go back even further, I had an earring company—I'm doing air quotes for listeners at home—in like second grade. I followed my mom around because she would do some sales and would sell these really shitty earrings that I just made out of bead kits and stuff. So, I still had a bunch of that material left over and I was like, "This is easy!" Earrings is a really easy business to get into which is one of the reasons I went into it before. To be honest, my original reason why I wanted to start a business because, as a kid, I was like, "I want to be Iron Man."

Tommy: Oh, cool! It's a good goal.

Sage: Yeah, I was like, "I want to be Iron Man, and I want to learn how to operate a business so why don't I get some practice at that while I'm in high school." So, my original goal was to go to school for engineering and kind of shut down the business after high school. But it did so well, I kind of kept it running and I honestly enjoyed running my business a lot more than I enjoyed any of my engineer classes. So, I kind of pivoted and said, "that's what I want to do now. I want to own an earring business, I just want to keep it going, maybe own a boutique someday." And it would be perfect. I honestly really liked it and after going to college, I figured out that is honestly what I wanted to do this whole time.

Tommy: What are some of your favorite products that you are selling right now?

Sage: I do like the books a lot because they are tiny little books, you can open them up and write in them. You can put passwords in them, you can customize them with your favorite books. I don't have a lot of pairs personally but every now and then I will have a good book I like and make myself one. I have my "3 Body Problem" pair of earrings which I wear a lot. The Netflix version of the book just came out. I can talk about that all day; I love that book. But I like those...I'm trying to look around. Oh my gosh! Sometimes, I'll make earrings...I like making laser-cut earrings a lot.

Tommy: Oh, that's interesting.

Sage: ...because I have access to that now through Northeastern which is great, with the EXP. Sometimes, I will just make silly ones like meme earrings. Like I have one of Bob Cat, which is just like a meme. I have ones that are just like the surprised Pikachu.

Tommy: Oh yeah, I've seen those!

Sage: So sometimes if I am bored, I will just go there and be like, "I got extra acrylic, let me make something silly." Yeah, I like doing acrylic stuff, there are a lot of people doing acrylic already but...

Tommy: But, if you are having fun with it, right? You're having fun and making money then who cares, right?

Sage: Yeah.

Tommy: That's awesome! So, I mentioned that—was that Snell you had access to the laser cut, laser cutter?

Sage: EXP.

Tommy: EXP, excuse me.

Sage: Ever since it opened—they have so much stuff, it's great—they have three laser cutters. I was one of the first people to get certified, which was even better because I could get in there and there wouldn't be any wait to use them.

Tommy: So, it does sound like Northeastern is helping your business a lot, in a way, right? So, specifically, we talked about the markets earlier, how have the markets helped with your business and just getting your name out there?

Sage: It's great! It's great for sales and great for networking. Especially, you talked about the Valentine's Day Market, that's one of the most sales I got in a day in like a long time. Everyone is walking through Curry, they're all in Curry—except there was one in the tents, maybe that was a Christmas one—when they are in Curry, it's great because you don't need a tent. I used to live right across the street so I could just walk all my stuff there. It's so much more convenient than doing markets across town or anywhere else in Massachusetts. But, yeah, and then I met a bunch

of people in the Northeastern business ecosystem. I met the guy that owns the bookstore, and he mentioned the opportunity of selling my stuff in the Northeastern Bookstore. I don't know where that's going but...

Tommy: I mean, that is a really crazy opportunity. That's awesome, good for you!

Sage: Then, I also really love just meeting the other vendors. Like, if someone asked me about Northeastern businesses, I would just give a shout out to everyone else. Like Hoosky is great, I'm now friends with the owner, there's—oh what is it called?—it's like something piglet bakery...

Tommy: Oh! Sweet Piglet.

Sage: Sweet Piglet Bakery!

Tommy: Yeah!

Sage: Absolute best pastries I have ever had!

Tommy: Oh, she's amazing. Yeah! She came on the podcast around Thanksgiving last year. Oh, she's a treat! No pun intended. She's great.

Sage: I'll be so hyped for the markets just to see those other businesses as well and like the store, it's called Craft Stone Studio, and then sell like little miniature kits.

Tommy: Yeah.

Sage: I don't know about other markets because I will make sales but then I will just buy from other vendors.

Tommy: Oh, that's funny.

Sage: It's fun because you get to meet the people who run the stores.

Tommy: Yeah, no, it strikes me as a really great networking opportunity for the entrepreneurial market. I mean didn't you...I think you mentioned on the phone call don't you have a collab coming up?

Sage: I did do a collab with Hoosky and so that's currently up on my store. Hoosky earrings, magnets, and key chains.

Tommy: Now, for those listening, Hoosky spelled H-O-O-S-K-Y. I don't think I know how to explain it, maybe you will be able to explain a little bit better than I can. But can you tell us...

Sage: If you have been on campus for any longer than a few hours, I would guarantee you have seen a Hoosky sweatshirt. It's just a silly looking dog that from far away looks like the Northeastern Husky. But it's not.

Tommy: That's cool. That's so cool that you were able to do a collab with them. That's really interesting too, two student businesses collaborating together. I'm sure that—I'd like to think that—those were very popular. That was a popular product, right?

Sage: Yeah, it's tricky because a lot of the stuff I sell online is not to Northeastern people, so they don't know what that is.

Tommy: Oh, that's funny.

Sage: There is a sense of community between student-run businesses because there are only so many. Like, you really get to know each other.

Tommy: That's cool. It does seem like it is a very tight network but it's a network where—just from what I observed at a market—just seems like you guys are supporting each other too and pointing each other in the right direction if you need help. Is that a fair statement?

Sage: Yeah, for sure.

Tommy: That's awesome. So, you guys are helping each other, and we just talked about the market and your adventures at EXP but, in general, how has Northeastern helped you in your entrepreneurial journey?

Sage: I think they definitely helped me figure out that entrepreneurship is what I want to be doing because I was originally engineering and...It was pretty easy to swap majors—switching from engineering to design—it's nice the ease of that and the support you get. I love seeing the events because they give a sort of showcase of what's out there because there is a lot of entrepreneurship resources, and it can be overwhelming to try to figure out which one to go to.

Like, they are very specialized, and this can be good and bad. Like, there is a lot to work with. When I first got to Northeastern, it was definitely confusing figuring out which club I want to be a part of because there's ones for like if you don't have a business yet, but you want to start one and then there's some for you already have a business and you want to grow it. I think they are all useful. Then there are the pitch competitions which are cool too to see what people are working on.

Tommy: That's awesome. So, Sage, it's been a blast talking with you today and I always like to end the podcast with this. Since this is the “Northeastern Next Podcast,” what is next for you and what is next for Sageware Fashion?

Sage: So, I have the Sherman Co-op starting in July. But even though I'm technically not getting paid for it yet, I pretty much already started. I've been going around Western Mass, pitching my business to stores. I just got in two more stores in Northampton, Mass if you want to check it out.

Tommy: Congrats!

Sage: 25 Central and BookLink Books.

Tommy: Congratulations, that's cool!

Sage: I got last minute invited to a market tomorrow—I guess “next” is relative—and I went to Dick's this morning and got a tent so I can do that.

Tommy: Nice!

Sage: So, I'm just going to be rushing around. I will be at a bunch of markets over the summer. I will be at some of the Seaport markets, one on like Assembly Square in Somerville. I'm just trying to go to as many events as I can which is going to be tricky to get all my stuff set up because I don't really have a car right now. So, I will be doing that. I want to try to expand into as much stuff as I can. It's great having a business that I can kind of change to my whim. It's like, I like doing earrings right now but if I want to into clothing—which a part of me does—I can start doing that.

Tommy: It feels like the natural next step, right?

Sage: Yeah. So, last semester, after my design classes, I have actually been getting better at sewing and stuff like that. So, that might be a new direction I'm going in. I also have a shipment of some enamel pins coming in so I'm actually like starting to get some of my designs out there which I'm excited for. Yeah, then I'm going to travel to some other cities to do sales.

Tommy: Love that. Is there a list somewhere where we can find all the places you are going to be this summer? Almost like a tour sheet. Not a tour sheet, like a tour poster.

Sage: I probably will add one to Sageware.shop. So, by the time this podcast is up, that will probably be on there with all the dates and all the locations. There probably will also be one at like which stores you can find my products as well.

Tommy: Awesome!

Sage: And I also just started wholesaling. So, if you are a store and you are listening, I'm on Faire.

Tommy: Faire. Alright, so that's spelled...actually I don't know how that is spelled.

Sage: F-A-I-R-E.

Tommy: Okay, great. That's awesome. Well, that sounds like you got some great things coming, especially, as you said, starting tomorrow. Next is tomorrow for you, that's awesome. Well, hey, Sage, thanks again for taking some time this afternoon to chat with me, I loved this chat. This was great. Thanks!

Music: Enters

Sage: Yeah, of course!

Tommy: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of “Northeastern Next.” Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at alumni@northeastern.edu to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I will see you the week after next.

Music: Fades