



**Alexandra Jankovich:** Today, I will talk with Jitse Groen, founder of Thuisbezorgd and by now the CEO of Just Eat Takeaway.com. He founded the company in 2000, when he was 21, with a capital of 50 euros. By now, the company has expanded into Just Eat Takeaway.com worth 15 billion euros. Welcome, Jitse.

**Jitse Groen:** Thank you.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** It is really great of you to take part in our interview series to mark the 10th anniversary of SparkOptimus. Your company has existed for 20 years and in my opinion, in those 20 years you have applied quite a few new rules of play, as we call it, of the digital era into practice. I would like to discuss some of them. We have also described them in our book. I thought it was nice to see how you put them into practice.

One of the rules of play is: Be early. You obviously started early on. You were one of the first, in 2000. I think the advantage is that, in relative anonymity and with only a small capital you can test things, which you were able to do until 2007, I believe.

**Jitse Groen:** That is right, it's the advantage of starting something new in general... Well, you are never alone, though you may think your idea is brilliant but usually some thirty compatriots alone have the same idea, so that is disappointing.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** Very disappointing.

**Jitse Groen:** On the other hand, a new concept usually does not bring in any money. In many cases, new concepts may solve a problem but usually it does not immediately bring earnings.

As in our case, we do not earn much per order, but we have many orders so that eventually solves the problem but in the beginning, everyone is small, and I actually enjoyed this initial period because everyone is equal. I also think all Formula 1 cars should be equal. That would be more square. For us, this was the case in the beginning. That has long changed, so many of our competitors have more money than we do but we have grown so big that it does not matter anymore so the playing field is more level now. If you don't have any money in 2000 and someone else has 500 million it will be quite tough.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** That's it. In the beginning, you were able to try things out through marketing. In an interview, you said you used roadside billboards, which was quite expensive but it had zero effect on website visitors.

**Jitse Groen:** The problem is you do not really have a clear understanding of what you are doing. You gain these insights later on, so if we now look at how our customer base develops we know that X percent is from existing customers and X percent from new customers. If you know this and you want to expand, you know roadside billboards will not help. It brings in very few new customers.

If you had measured this at the time, which I was unable to, but if I had we would have concluded, after two weeks of billboards, we had not gained one customer. But if we had looked at the total number of orders we would have seen a twenty percent increase for that week. That may be true, but that was because it was raining. These are things you only understand later on so I would like to recommend anyone, if you are setting up a small business and it is fine to do this in the weekend, you do not have to do it during the week but to think carefully about how your company really works. 'Why will we grow over the next month? I see growth, but what is the reason?' If you know this, you can act on it and put more effort into it.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** You referred to it. I think one of the new rules of play is KPI-driven performance. Look at your dashboard, exactly as you said.

**Jitse Groen:** Very dangerous, but go on.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** Very dangerous. Why do you think so?

**Jitse Groen:** You can easily misread the KPIs.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** That's it, and that is why we often say to companies: Rethink your KPIs because we often see them steering on the wrong ones. So I wanted to ask you: What are the first KPIs you look at when you wake up?

**Jitse Groen:** Actually, I look at new customers and the ordering behaviour of existing customers. So, the number of orders per existing customer and the number of new customers. That is the only thing you should look at. If you can look at nothing else, these are the two things, for a company like ours. We are a platform internet company, so you look at those two. I said you easily misread KPIs, but you can interpret them well for your company.

For example, if someone in the sales department says: I have made things very easy for management, because that is why we grow so fast. You should actually look at the KPI decision tree and say: No, you are wrong. Look, you are responsible for 0.02 percent of our growth. Though that is also important, you have to explain it because eventually, if you take the existing customers' ordering behaviour for example, people order around 10 times a year through us. That



---

Alexandra Jankovich in conversation with: Jitse Groen, founder & CEO Just Eat Takeaway.com, June 2021

---

seems slight, but we have over 50 million customers. Why is that? Because they have different options.

If you can only order pizza, you will not order food very often. You do not order McDonald's every day, but if you have McDonald's and pizza and sushi you have your day cut out for you so what a sales manager should look at is: Do I have the right mix? And even more important, on a deeper level: Do I have the right mix in Appelscha? Probably not. No offence to Appelscha, but I think it is a bit better in Amsterdam.

This way, you can set your KPIs well, but if you had KPIs like: You have to sign up fifty pizzerias it does not make any sense, because you can randomly say: I need fifty pizzerias but it does not do much for the growth of your company.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** Is it nice for them to work towards a clear goal and to know how much they contribute?

**Jitse Groen:** I am not sure if it is nice as such, but I do think it is clear. You can make it very clear to people: This is what we expect from you this year. Of course you can make various excuses why you cannot manage. Possibly, there is a competitor in the way or something else is hampering you. You can say outright: If you do not sign up this figure, our annual growth will decrease. That is by definition bad for sales, because you lack the funds to expand the department.

So it is a circle, more or less, but, again, you have your KPIs but you have to interpret them, in accordance with your company's standards. What Americans like to do is sign up all existing restaurants without asking them. It is very nice for your sales goals, but at the end of the day not for your company. It should be a two-way process.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** Another rule of play that I think you apply into practice very determinedly: 'Winner takes all. Play to win.' Can you explain how this mechanism works?

**Jitse Groen:** I prefer 'Winner takes most'. It is more or less the same thing, but still.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** And why do you prefer that?

**Jitse Groen:** 'Winner takes all' sounds as if it is your main goal to do your competitors in. That is not the right approach, which is to make your company grow as much as possible. That this will reduce your competition is just some kind of consequence. So 'Winner takes most' can lead to 'Winner takes all', that is definitely true but, and this is especially the case with these kinds of tech companies the larger you become, the more customers you get and, in our case, the more

restaurant partners you get. The result is we have the widest choice, our prices are the lowest and we have the most consumers. If you ask a restaurant, people question our rates sometimes. I am not blind. They never say the average restaurant gains over €100,000 a year through Thuisbezorgd. That is quite a lot for restaurants that fit in an average living room. You should not underestimate this. Yes, and this cranks up the fly wheel that brings in a certain profitability which you can then invest in attracting new customers. Yes, but that is a choice. By no means every entrepreneur decides to do so. And I think this is by definition a mistake and definitely on the internet.

Everything on the internet grows, so if you do not, you will eventually disappear. It is as simple as that. If your company hoards its profits, there is always another company that does not and keeps investing in his or her company and will eventually outgrow you. It also applies to these models, which act as an accelerator. It is often very hard to overtake someone, but once you are overtaken just try and overtake them again after they have disappeared on the horizon. These are very risky decisions for entrepreneurs or managers to make to say: I just do not grow.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** Yes, I agree with you. And I think you have done so very consciously per country. You can wonder if ‘Winner takes all’ holds true, but for which region does it hold true? I think you first did your best to be the market leader in the Netherlands and Belgium. When you were profitable in the Netherlands, you worked very hard to conquer market leadership in Germany. And now with Just Eat, you are very busy investing in England. Perhaps you would like to comment on this as far as short and long-term investments go and profits and turnover.

**Jitse Groen:** Every entrepreneur has a long-term vision and I find it is easier for me than for the management, people who are hired as managers by a company. They are often judged on the short term by shareholders. At the end of the day, you have to realise, whether it is shareholders in let us say the VC world, private equity or a quoted company every shareholder has a different horizon and this is rarely longer-term than your horizon as a businessman. It is okay if you realise this, because you can replace shareholders or buy them out but if you do not realise it, you will have a problem at some point.

All the same, you have to do what is best for your company and the best for our company – it took us quite a long time to become the market leader in the Netherlands. We found out that our website was actually rather big, internationally. Which is odd. You would think the market for a Dutch company is not so big. But there are quite a few Dutch internet companies that are big because there is a very good market for e-commerce companies. So at one point we faced the



option: Are we happy being just in the Netherlands? Do we want to stay behind the dykes and things will be alright? In any case, I had the idea that was not very exciting. You are just minding the store, which is not a very nice way to spend your day.

And I saw that there were many opportunities abroad as most countries lagged behind the Netherlands. Well, Belgium was terribly complicated. You quickly learn it is not as simple as marching troops across the border and smoothly building up a successful company again. It was very difficult. Germany was even harder, because when you enter as a Dutchman, you think: It looks a bit like the Netherlands, it is quite old-fashioned. There is still some work to be done, but then you realise you are only in Düsseldorf. Germany is much larger than our country. You need much larger means. And, which is often a pitfall, you are used to the Dutch ways when you try something.

The same applies to Thuisbezorgd. No matter what we do, it always works, because we are a big website. But if you are in Germany where no one knows you and you do the same the effect will be, let us say, ten times smaller. What does this mean? Much larger investments and a far smaller effectiveness. That is obviously not very encouraging when you start over there. That was how it was, so the start was very tough and it was a long-term struggle but you have to make the right decisions.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** While growing, how do you remain a fast-learning, enterprising organisation while also having to implement more structures and rules as well as having to integrate all the acquisitions on the side?

**Jitse Groen:** That is hard, indeed, but again it comes down to your management so you have to talk to your management and say: Guys, this is about to happen. It often happens suddenly. It does not happen gradually, but suddenly you have a problem. It often involves situations where suddenly a certain scale has been reached and things are no longer possible or that we have set up a new department.

One of my favourite topics is 'Legal'. If there is a legal department, people tend to go there and say: I have a plan. Is that allowed? That is completely wrong. No, the right order is to first build something or present a project plan and then you go to Legal, because if you do that first, you stop thinking creatively. You only remember the concerns that the people in Legal had. That is the wrong order, so when something new is introduced in the company you should realise that the consequence could be certain things will be slower and you have to act on it.



And you should not exercise too much restraint in relocating departments. We moved departments that were no longer in the right place. A sales task can very well become a marketing task or the other way around, also because we have new ideas. At first one or two people are trying something that is completely insignificant and all of a sudden it grows into 300 people. With 300 men, you start thinking: What are they doing? For example, they are putting stickers on restaurants. Is that sales or marketing? So you discuss it. The same with uniforms for deliverers. It used to be unimportant, but it has become quite a large order. And they do need clothes, or they will get rather cold. Those are valid reasons to occasionally reconsider your organisation and say: We could do things differently. We have been buying many coats. Is that process so very different from buying terminals, for instance? You may have to set up another department for it.

You should deal with the corporate grind as soon as you encounter it. And you do so by asking time and again: What are we doing? Is it still sensible to retain this structure or should we expand faster? Yes, and sometimes you are too late and you have to take things apart again. Departments don't like it, so you have to say: It is not right to do it this way, or we will get nothing done. And people love meetings, although this has changed now, with all the Zoom meetings. But you have to prevent too many meetings, because they keep you from your work.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** What do you do, when you think people are having too many meetings?

**Jitse Groen:** It often has a reason, if people meet a lot. It usually means there is a lot of resistance among the departments. So you have to look into it, and make someone responsible. Also something I have learned. If you make five people responsible, nobody really is, so you should say: Sjaak. You are going to address this. Sjaak will immediately have a problem, but you do make him the boss. So you will all do what Sjaak wants. And then Sjaak comes to you and says: Marie refuses to cooperate. Okay. So you will have to talk to Marie. But if you do not do this and you do not set clear rules, it is... That is the Dutch disease, everyone is the boss, which is bad. You say: Sjaak is the boss, this is why and Sjaak will fix things.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** How did you adapt your leadership to the new situation? Or changed it over the years?

**Jitse Groen:** Well, in fits and starts. When you have a student company, everyone is in the same room. It is easy, you can directly address everyone and say what the dos and don'ts are. But it is also tiring, because at first it revolves around your own thoughts. I am not good at everything, so at the end of the day that is a small problem. As you expand, you can hire better and better



employees and you see people drop out, because they cannot keep up with the growth rate. That is just how it works. Unfortunately, very few people admit it. They say they can still handle it, although they feel they cannot.

If you start with one man in your department and later on there are 300 that learning curve is too steep for everyone. And you cannot easily solve it, because with a start-up, it is often people's first job so they simply lack the experience. If you hire people from Unilever, they say: 300 people? I have 400 now, so no problem. They will get into trouble too, because one year later we have 600 people. So that really is a challenge, for me as well because in principle things change.

At the same time, I'm still an entrepreneur, so I still meddle in many things. Not to pester people, but to take the company to a higher level. You must constantly steer things and say: Hey department X, do you realise if you press that button, department Y has a problem? It used to be easier, as people were in the same room, so someone started protesting: "If you do that, many people will start calling me." But you have to realise our broader management now consists of fifty people. I am not doing things all alone. We have an excellent management. We have a top layer, but below it we have a good management, as well as abroad, locally. I am more of a facilitator now instead of saying that things should change in Spain, for example, as I just do not know.

But sometimes things strike your eye. A few years ago, walking around in Poland, I noticed a poster of our company. I thought: Hey, the orange of this poster is different from the orange in Austria. That is odd. We only have one department making posters. Then you find out there is not one department making posters, but two. You see? That is very interesting. That is the entrepreneurial approach that you should always keep in play in your firm.

**Alexandra Jankovich:** Well, congratulations with your enormous successes so far. Well done. And thank you, Jitse, for your cooperation.

**Jitse Groen:** No problem. All the best to you, too.