



# Making Something From Nothing: Seth Watson Of 'Distillery of Modern ART' On How To Go From Idea To Launch

An Interview With Fotis Georgiadis

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**As** *a part of our series called "Making Something From Nothing", I had the pleasure of interviewing Seth Watson.*

*An innovator who genuinely believes nothing is out of the realm of possibility, Seth*

*Watson is taking his 18 years of hospitality expertise at Track Seven Events and implementing those skills into his newest endeavor, Distillery of Modern Art. A true connoisseur, the conceptualization of DoMA started with a glass of whiskey and was quickly infused with his sentiment for art and music to build the only full-sensory craft distillery. An instigator of anything that facilitates creativity, Watson is a graduate of the University of Florida, where he first developed his appreciation for not only whiskey but products that are affordable, approachable, and of vast value. He currently lives in Atlanta, GA, with his wife and two children, with whom he has set out to build a legacy, for which Watson and the Distillery of Modern Art are well on their way.*

**Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a bit about your “childhood backstory”?**

**I** was born and raised in New York by a single mother and have four siblings. We moved back and forth from New York to Florida many times. I went to college in Gainesville, Florida — Go Gators! Immediately after college, I moved to Atlanta to begin working.

**Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?**

It’s short and sweet, but my favorite quote is “Anything worth doing is worth doing right” I believe that was Hunter S. Thompson. It’s everything that drives me. I’m either 0 or 100%. I do not find time in my life to half-ass anything I do. It’s not worth it.

**Is there a particular book, podcast, or film that made a significant impact on you? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?**

“On the Road” by Jack Kerouac. In my youth, I was rebellious. I was not a troublemaker per se, but I certainly liked to push limits, explore, and feel invincible. Experiences in life lead me to want to create positive ones for others.

**Ok super. Let’s now shift to the main part of our discussion. There is no shortage of good ideas out there. Many people have good ideas all the time. But people seem to struggle in taking a good idea and translating it into an actual business. Can you share a few ideas from your experience about how to overcome this challenge?**

I would say a good idea or bad; not everyone is meant to own a business. In my experience, it’s best to take your time, do as much market research as possible and spend time with others already in the industry. You’d be surprised how willing people are to sit and talk with you about what has worked and what hasn’t. Learning from others’ mistakes is invaluable.

**Often when people think of a new idea, they dismiss it saying someone else must have thought of it before. How would you recommend that someone go about researching whether or not their idea has already been created?**

Chances are, someone else HAS already thought about it before. The idea doesn’t need to be the first, but it can be the best. I think of Apple in this regard. While they have been on the cutting edge of innovation, they rarely introduce a product that hasn’t been introduced; they just do it way better — research research research.

**For the benefit of our readers, can you outline the steps one has to go through, from when they think of the idea, until it finally lands in a customer’s hands? In particular, we’d love to hear about how to file a patent, how to source a good manufacturer, and how to find a retailer to distribute it.**

To open a distillery, you must obtain a DSP (Distilled Spirits Plant) permit from the Federal government. The trick is, you must first own the equipment and provide the serial numbers. So the outlay of cash before you can even apply for the permit is substantial. To open a distillery, you must first have a property. That property must be zoned for manufacturing distilled spirits, which isn't common or easy. Depending on where you live, you may need a building rezoned. If you are repurposing a property to be used for spirit production, you need to bring it up to code, which depends on the city/state you are in. Next, you must create your brand and use a lawyer to file a trademark. Another hurdle to have said trademark go into effect you must have sold a product under that trade name, not just file it. Fast forward to having obtained all licenses and permits to open such a facility, let's say 16–22 months. Now you must build that facility. Depending on size, it could take 8 -20 months. These two things can be happening simultaneously, so assume at least two years to make a project like this from conception to completion, excluding a global pandemic.

After all of this is done, you now need to source materials, raw goods, packaging, labels, corks, etc. Since we are manufacturing all our spirits, we have complete control of how much is made and when. While every state is different, we live in a 3-tier state in Georgia. That means we cannot sell directly to stores, bars, restaurants, etc. Manufacturers sell to distributors, and distributors sell to stores, bars, and restaurants- leaving the manufacturers like us out of the loop. We must build the relationships so that these other businesses want our product and count on the distributors to get it to them. Using marketing and advertising to get the word out about our product is how we get it into consumers' hands.

### **What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me When I First Started Leading My Company” and why?**

1. No matter how much money you plan to raise or spend on a project, it's double. For example, we had the unfortunate global pandemic hit one week after we started demolition in the distillery. Not only did that affect business in

hospitality massively, but there were no contractors. The supply chain was seriously hit; copper and lumber needed to be purchased when they were most expensive, and it would be nearly impossible to find employees.

2. Banks only want to lend money to new businesses or startups if they have enough collateral. Not everyone is fortunate enough to own a home or investments to leverage. I was told early on that it would be easy. It was next to impossible during the pandemic, where even the banks were scared — telling a bank, “Hey! I want to build a 15,000 sq ft distillery that includes a cocktail lounge, a modern art gallery, a spirits production facility, a bottling line, and a private events space, and I’ve never done something like this before” doesn’t go over the way you’d hope as an entrepreneur.

3. Personal care and mental health are more important than starting a new business. If you can’t balance the two for your good, don’t do it.

4. Don’t expect potential investors to follow up with you, even if you trust or respect them. Trying to give someone space to decide has a fine line.

5. ALWAYS get everything in writing.

**Let’s imagine that a reader reading this interview has an idea for a product that they would like to invent. What are the first few steps that you would recommend that they take?**

Pride gets In the way of many people starting something new. You don’t know what you don’t know, and as I’ve advised many over the years, work smarter, not harder. Why reinvent the wheel when you can save time and money by leaning on experts and leveraging their insight to move the ball forward.

**There are many invention development consultants. Would you recommend**

**that a person with a new idea hire such a consultant, or should they try to strike out on their own?**

I have been working with a consulting company since my idea was on a napkin. If it weren't for Scott Shiller at Thoroughbred Spirits Group and his team, we would not have been able to launch this brand. They handhelmed me from financial modeling to product development and design.

**What are your thoughts about bootstrapping vs looking for venture capital? What is the best way to decide if you should do either one?**

There is an old saying that bank money is cheap. Meaning, that borrowing money from a bank keeps more equity in your pocket. Once those loans get paid off, you still own it all. However, I think it's very wise to raise capital. Now, just because someone is willing to write a check doesn't mean you should take it. Strategic capital is super important. You want to have the right money with you. People within the industry are a clear choice. You want to bring people in with skills or expertise that you don't have. My most significant piece of advice is not to give up controlling interest. Maintaining at least 51% of your business will allow you to see your vision through.

**Ok. We are nearly done. Here are our final questions. How have you used your success to make the world a better place?**

I haven't yet, unfortunately. As we are just getting started, our goal is simply to offer a great product and experience at an affordable price.

**You are an inspiration to a great many people. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.**

Food insecurities and lack of clean drinking water at home and around the world

would be my number 1.

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.**

I think of folks Like Warren Buffett and Mackenzie Scott who have done and continue to do great things for the world. Sitting with them over a meal and gaining insight into what makes them tick would be amazing. I would also like to chat with them about their families. I believe you can tell a lot about people based on how they discuss their personal life outside of business. I also think of folks in the music/entertainment world that I look up to. An old friend Scott “Scooter” Braun, who is a media mogul, is one of those. We’ve known each other for 20+ years but haven’t connected in some time.

**Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.**