

Sawbones 497: Plexus

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Clint: *Sawbones* is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And what a thrill it is to be here with you, Sydnee.

Sydnee: Well, it's a thrill to be here with you too, Justin.

Justin: On a team up.

Sydnee: Yeah, that's right! This is a team up. You already know our topic 'cause we did this one together.

Justin: Yes, we worked together on it.

Sydnee: Well, it combined— I mean *Sawbones* has always been a combination of our passions, I think.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: You know. I like medical history.

Justin: I like brands.

Sydnee: Yes, well you like— I meant like being funny.

Justin: Oh, like being funny. Okay, yeah.

Sydnee: You like—

Justin: I like being funny. Alright.

Sydnee: I think you like being— I mean, I'm—

Justin: Be a real prison if I didn't, wouldn't it.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: Phwoooo!

Sydnee: Just—

Justin: Phwooo, but—

Sydnee: Just stuck being hilarious all the time.

Justin: "But doctor, I am Pagliacci." [wheezes] You know? [laughs]

Sydnee: No, I love... debunking fake medical claims. I love get— letting people know about snake oil.

Justin: Yah.

Sydnee: And you love talking about MLMs.

Justin: I do, I love talking about MLMs. I love talking about businesses in general, but especially MLMs. Because I just think that they are fascinating. Fascinating. Love an MLM. [snorts]

Sydnee: I fully acknowledge— And we've done MLMs before, many times, and we—

Justin: Yeah we get suckered in over and over and over again.

Sydnee: And—

Justin: We never learn.

Sydnee: Well, and so I would—

Justin: Is that you mean?

Sydnee: No, I always get a little anxious.

Justin: Is that what you mean by “did MLMs multiple times”?

Sydnee: No, I don’t mean “did” ML— No, we didn’t— We don’t— We haven’t done MLMs.

Justin: I know. I—

Sydnee: I’ve never do— Have you ever?

Justin: You had the expression on your face—

Sydnee: Did you—?

Justin: — where you already had the next thing cued up that you’re going to say, so I know that whatever I said then, you were not going to react to.

Sydnee: Well I didn’t understand what you meant.

Justin: I know, because you had already cued up.

Sydnee: I was.

Justin: You were moved on from my nonsense.

Sydnee: Well, I was thinking about— I was reminiscing about the time we went to Salt Lake City, and—

Justin: That admittedly sounds more fun than listening to your husband talk during the podcast. [chuckles]

Sydnee: No, I mean—

Justin: I will 100% grant you.

Sydnee: I was talking about when we went there—

Justin: The mind must wander, it mustn't—

Sydnee: So that we— [chuckles] So that we could take down essential oil MLMs in the home of essential oil MLMs.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And I remember thinking “We have put ourselves in danger, perhaps.”

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I always feel like when we do these episodes, we're gonna get some angry emails. I'm gonna get some angry Facebook messages I feel like, from like people I went to high school with, who are gonna be like, “Hey girl.”

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: “I was so disappointed.” [laughs]

Justin: “Hey babe. Babes.”

Sydnee: “Hey girlypop, I'm so disappointed.”

Justin: You made that one up.

Sydnee: No, “girlypop” is totally a thing.

Justin: Okay, I will trust you on that. So, I— What Sydnee— As charming as Sydnee has put on my bone fides here, I will say that also I am a AP-award winning business reporter.

Sydnee: Oh, that's true. That's true.

Justin: As well as a podcaster. I won a local AP award. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: For a story I did while at the Huntington Tribune, about I don't remember exactly, but I believe it was about some pizza places.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. A business.

Justin: That were— A business, yes.

Sydnee: It's a business.

Justin: But yes, as an AP-award winning business journalist, I have the plaque, I thought that I can lend some of my business reporting acumen here.

Sydnee: I think—

Justin: That will really get to the truth of the matter.

Sydnee: I hope you can help me, Justin, because we're gonna talk about Plexus.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And the thing is, this is not hard to talk to you about what are their products? What is the stuff in them? What do they do? What do they not do? That— This is an easy part.

What is hard for me, and I'll get to this, is usually when we take on kinda pseudo-scientific claims and companies, I can flesh out a whole story for you. And I got a lot of holes that you can help me fill in this one. So first of all, I know that Plexus, the company.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Which probably if you've heard of Plexus, it's because of a weight loss thing.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I think that's— Most people are like, "Oh, is that a weight loss thing? I think I've heard of that." You may have gotten a message from

someone you went to high school with, urging you [chuckles] to purchase it.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: You know, talking about the great results they've had with it, and then maybe... offering you a great new business opportunity. So Plexus started out, as far as I can tell, back in 2008. And I think the company was older than this, but this is when we get into this health space.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: If you can call it that, with the "breast chek kit."

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And when I say, "breast chek kit," I know you are assuming that is spelt C-H-E-C-K, like you would think "check" is spelled.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: It is spelled C-H-E-K, which I checked repeatedly. It is—

Justin: You C-H-E-Ked repeatedly. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yeah. [chuckles] Is that a spelling of "check"—?

Justin: That's like somebody who's in a hurry, I think. Like fast chek, and they don't have time to put the C in there, you know what I mean?

Sydnee: I—

Justin: For like a quick check at a cashing place.

Sydnee: [mutters closer to the mic] Is it a legal thing? Is it— It's not really for breast checking, it's for breast chek-ing.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: And so it's not— you can't be liable? I don't know.

Justin: It's like how they have to— "You know, legally they have to spell Fruit Loops F-R-O-O-T 'cause there's no fruit."

Sydnee: Well, that's—

Justin: "In them."

Sydnee: That's what, I mean, no seriously. Of like cheese product.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I— So, they still sell this. You can check it out online if you want, if you look up the breast chek kit.

Justin: You can C-H-E-K it out on— [wheezes]

Sydnee: You can breast C-H-E-K it out online. [chuckles] The— And they're also like you can find a lot of YouTube videos. It's so hard to research Plexus without just being inundated with testimonials from the people who sell and use Plexus.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There are lots of YouTube videos of the ambassadors.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: That's what they're called.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Demonstrating the product. And not demonstrating on themselves, they're not... topless, it's not that kind of video. But they're like taking it out of the box to show you what it is. Because I could not— Like they don't show you on the website what the product is, they just show it to you in the bag.

And so I was like, "What is this thing?" It is a— If you open the box that it comes in, you get a pamphlet that describes self-breast exams. And that's

all I could think, like, "What— I know what a self-breast exam is. What equipment, what tools would you need with this?"

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right? 'Cause like to my understanding, a self-breast exam is when you use your hand to... palpate or touch—

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: — your breast, and feel for things.

Justin: Maybe what you need is a T-shirt that says, "FBI – Federal Body Inspector."

Sydnee: No.

Justin: And that would allow you—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: — [chuckles] to.

Sydnee: I don't like— No. No.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: These are self-breast exams.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: On yourself.

Justin: Even on yourself, you should be a legally man— like a legally permitted Federal Body Investigator. [wheezes]

Sydnee: Okay, you— It's almost easier if you do look at a picture of this thing, but if you— I'm gonna try to describe it, 'cause I kept thinking "glove." It's not a glove, 'cause it's like a rounded... oven mitt-shaped kind of thing. Not— No, not— Potholder. That's what I'm thinking, potholder, not oven mitt. It's like a potholder-shaped—

Justin: [giggles]

Sydnee: — piece of pink. It's latex free, so I don't know.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Some sort of plasticky material. It's double layered, and it's got gel in between the two layers.

Justin: Okay, so why though?

Sydnee: You put it over your breast, and then the bottom layer will kind of like stick a little to your skin. But it's not messy, they're very clear on that, the gel not going on your skin, it's mess free. You just do the exam through this... gel... plastic thing.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I— Okay, honey, I saw this and I thought "Okay, this is not something I'm familiar with, as a physician."

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: "I've never seen this." When we perform breast exams in the office, we do not use anything like this. We don't use gel. We put gloves on... which may or may not be latex free.

Justin: But there's no gel involved.

Sydnee: But there's no gel. And so that's why I was trying to figure out what would the— its purpose be. So I started trying to dig into the breast check kit, what is the science behind using this gel layer, because what they say is that it makes it easier to feel things.

Justin: Okay?

Sydnee: By reducing friction.

Justin: Okay, I can kinda understand that.

Sydnee: So then you can more cleanly rub on your—

Justin: Imagine if you're—

Sydnee: I don't— I'm about to explain this and— [chuckles] It's—

Justin: Imagine if you're— Imagine if, Syd, imagine if you had jelly all over your jugs, right? And if you had jelly all over your jugs, and you were rubbing your hand on your jugs, they would slide [chuckles] gracefully across them, so you'd be able to sense, *Princess and the Pea* style.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: All of the— Any, not all of, any aberrations there might be, right?

Sydnee: So that's what— Okay. That is what they're claiming.

Justin: Right. I don't know what the gloves are for, 'cause it seems like you wouldn't need to gloves.

Sydnee: Oh, there are no gloves. No. I'm saying—

Justin: Oh, it's just the jelly.

Sydnee: — it's just the thing.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: It's just a double plastic layer, with gel in between.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That's pink.

Justin: Alright. I guess it protects you from getting the gel on you? I guess?

Sydnee: Well, then the gel is not on your hand, or on the— or on your boob.

Justin: That doesn't make any sense.

Sydnee: It's just in between. Anyway. They say that's it's gonna make it easier to fill an— to feel anything that might be in the breast tissue. I don't— So then I looked for the studies. Okay, well who developed this? Was this made by... an OBGYN, or a breast surgeon, or a, you know, a nurse, or a someone with some sort of health credentials?

I couldn't find any evidence of— I could not find! Who made it! I couldn't find any studies evaluating its use! It doesn't claim to, to be fair. They don't claim any studies.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: And they're very clear that this is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of anything. It's just to facilitate self-breast exams, they claim this will help do so, and I could not— I mean, I guess I could like logic that that makes sense, but that's not how we do science, right?

Justin: It kinda— It feels like one of those things they would've come up with in the Middle Ages to like, "This seems like it should work."

Sydnee: The founder of the company—

Justin: That's giving the Middle Ages too much credit.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: Another time goes better.

Sydnee: The guy on the website, who they say founded the company, and introduced its flagship product, is a man named Tarl Robinson.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: I—

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: — do not see any claim that Tarl made this.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: I don't see where he like found the technology or purchased it. I didn't see like he was, you know, passionate about breast health and wanted to make this more available.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I don't see that. I'm not saying he's not, I'm just— I just don't know where that— I don't know why. Like why this, Tarl? Who got it? There was one YouTube video from one of the ambassadors who's like, "Introducing the Plexus breast chek kit by Danielle Sequeira."

I don't know who that is, and I can't find any evidence of them as the inventor. So I don't— This is very mind-boggling to me. Usually there's like a story behind a product like that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: It has not been evaluated by the FDA. There's no studies I can find. And I'll just say this, does this work or not? Well currently, and to be fair, this was not true in 2008 but this is true now in 2024... Most major medical societies recommend against doing self-breast exams. Or at least say, "We don't have any evidence that they're helpful."

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: The United States Preventative Service Taskforce does not recommend them, and actually suggest that they could cause harm. And I know that that sounds like a wild thing, like how would examining your own breasts harm you?

Justin: Well, 'cause inaction, right? Through inaction?

Sydnee: Well, no, if you fi— Because you are— What if you find something and you're like, "Uh oh, I'm worried," and then you go to your doctor and say, "Uh oh, I'm worried about this," and your doctor feels it and thinks, "Well I'm not worried but they're really worried."

Maybe we should do some studies, maybe we should do a biopsy, maybe we should do some other things.” What they’re saying is there’s a risk of a lot more unnecessary—

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: — tests and procedures when you do self-breast exams. Because you generally don’t know exactly what you’re feelin’ for.

Justin: Isn’t there also though if you don’t know what you’re feeling for, then you could miss something, and think you’re fine.

Sydnee: There—

Justin: This is what I’m saying.

Sydnee: There is that too.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: There is that too, but there is— there’s no evidence that they increase the rate of cancer detection. To be fair, and the American Cancer Society says this as well, and in both of these organisations are pretty—

The American Cancer Society’s pretty much like clinical breast exams, meaning the ones your doctors do, as screening tools. Meaning just when they’re doing it for screening aren’t great. And the ACS says maybe we shouldn’t even do those.

So there’s a lot of debate as to whether or not we should be using our hands to examine breast tissue and try to decide if there’s something there. Now conversely, most masses and lumps are first detected by the patient themselves.

But it’s not through a self-breast exam, it’s usually in incidental thing. You’re getting dressed, you’re adjusting your bra or swimsuit, you’re bathing.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And you feel something new, or you see something new in the mirror. So yes, it is always important to familiarize yourself with the way your breasts look and feel, so that if something changes you can notify your medical provider immediately. That is absolutely important, but I have no evidence to suggest that we need a product to facilitate self-breast exams.

And I generally do not recommend, or at least most medical societies, this isn't about me, most medical societies don't even recommend you do self-breast exams. So, that's their flagship product.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I don't know why it exists. I don't know if it works. They've donated a lot of them. [pause] That's great. As somebody who works in a— has worked— done a lot of like charitable medical work, can I just tell you like how frustrating that has gotta be for some people on the other end of that.

Justin: I can't imagine.

Sydnee: To get giant boxes of these. I'm just gonna— I'm just being honest with you. Since then, the company's expanded into a bunch of other products. Okay? And so I wanna talk about the products who've probably known them for.

What is the story behind how they got to these products? I don't know, Tarl wanted to help with other things. Like, "hope, health, and happiness." That's what their company is about. This is— That's what they say. Their company is about "expanding hope, health, and happiness. So, how do we do that? Well, we have products in gut health, weight loss, or weight management."

Justin: Ohhh.

Sydnee: Is what they say. "Skincare, general nutrition, family nutrition, and" quote unquote "active lifestyle."

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: So what are these products? I wanna start with active lifestyle, 'cause that was the first thing I clicked on.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: I— Liked I know what those other things are. What are active lifestyle products? There's a bunch of packets you can buy. There's a whole— And you can look at all these products online if you want.

A lot of these packets are labelled "active," and some of them are labelled "hydrate." And basically, these are like little, you know, like drink packets. You would add the powder to water.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Or whatever. They come in flavours like pineapple lemongrass.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And peach mango.

Justin: Mm, that sounds nice.

Sydnee: There's blueberry acai, probably.

Justin: Ooo. [wheezes]

Sydnee: I think something like that.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] The active packets have— I looked at the ingredients, which are all right there, it's not hidden. They've got a bunch of vitamins, they've got some herbal stuff like panax.

Justin: Ooo, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: That was in Pepsi Max.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: [mutters] I hear it makes your ding dong bigger.

Sydnee: They don't claim that.

Justin: [wheezes] That's just what I heard.

Sydnee: They also tend—

Justin: On another podcast.

Sydnee: — tend to have a lot of caffeine. Generally in the form of coffee— green coffee bean extract.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: That's what most of the caffeine in most of these products comes from, but—

Justin: Some of the healthiest sounding caffeine for sure.

Sydnee: Exactly. But there are tea extracts, and other— there's just a lot of ways they put caffeine in these things. There are hydrate packages— packets, which are just like Gatorade stuff in coconut water. I mean it's just an electrolyte thing, right? But they're called "hydrate," and they also come in flavours.

There's a supplement called "edge," it's just caffeine with some amino acids. Under "gut health," there's again a variety of products. Their bundles for gut health are pretty expensive.

Justin: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: Like if you get the big bundles of multiple packets and powders and pills and all this stuff all put together. But they've got— like they're family-sized. Ewww. The "family-sized" stresses me out, 'cause are you— They're not saying "give these to your kids," they're just saying it's a family-sized packet.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: They're not saying "give it to your kids," they're just saying... it is family sized. You do what you want. I hate that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There are a lot of pre- and pro-biotics in these things. So like— You'll find a lot of the same sort of microorganisms, bacteria and stuff that we find in a lot of probiotic supplements online. And is there some data behind probiotics? Yes. Do they do all the things that people say probiotics do? We have no evidence of that.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There are a lot of cleanses, which have magnesium.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So you know what magnesium does?

Justin: A lot of stuff.

Sydnee: It does a lot of stuff, but one thing it can also do, in terms of cleansing you—

Justin: Burns really bright, like wow.

Sydnee: Well there's that too. In terms of cleansing you.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: It can act like a laxative.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: So. And there—

Justin: Does it help your intestines absorb water? Is that what— the laxative effect?

Sydnee: My— Well, it's usually in the form of magcitrade, and then yeah, it's just this like... stimulant laxative that just psssh. They're combined usually in all these packets with something called the "slim micro-biome activating."

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Or "slim hunger control." These are the pink drinks, and we're gonna get into those.

Justin: That's what I've heard a lot about.

Sydnee: Yes, the big-time pink drinks. Those are in the gut health packages. So they're selling you weight loss products within gut health—

Justin: Weight management.

Sydnee: Oh sorry, yes.

Justin: Weight management is—

Sydnee: They are called "slim."

Justin: Weight management is good, because it says that the effect could be the same as not taking it.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm, that's true.

Justin: And it's just fine. [chuckles]

Sydnee: That's true.

Justin: It's just great.

Sydnee: And I'm gonna get into those. There— This is a theme, by the way, with Plexus. 'Cause those have caffeine too. Caffeine is a big theme. Many of the weight loss supplements, especially like the pink drink, have... caffeine, usually again from green coffee bean extract, or polydextrose. Which is a pre-biotic fibre.

And to give you an idea, “poly-dextrose is a poly-sacuride food ingredient, composed of randomly bonded glucose polymers.” So what this is, it’s a bulking agent. It thickens stuff, it bulks stuff, it absorbs a ton of water. So it absorbs a bunch of water, makes you feel full.

Justin: And then you...

Sydnee: It also has a laxative effect.

Justin: Okay well, I mean... [chuckles]

Sydnee: So, a lot of their weight loss supplements, and if you get into like all the different things that they sell, they’re packets of powder that you mix with water, and they have caffeine and poly-dextrose.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: There are pills that have caffeine, and some of them have some like herbal things that have— I mean, anecdotal evi— I mean, there are no studies linked on any of this.

Usually when it comes to this sort of stuff, the— you’ll go to their website, and they’ll have all their products and all of their claims, and then they’ll be like, “Check out all of our research.” And you go to a tab where they tell you all the research they’ve done to support this. And usually it’s pretty flimsy stuff.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It’s like some an— You’re lucky if you get an animal model. It’s usually petri dish stuff. They didn’t even have that, that I could find!

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: If it’s out there, it is not easily accessible. Which is, I mean, really rare for this kinda thing.

Justin: Yeah, there’s no effort made to try to fool— to sway you, right?

Sydnee: I will also say that they have these things called “Plexus Lean,” which is like a meal replacement shake.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And they recommend that you replace two meals a day with this Plexus Lean shake weight loss.

Justin: Woah.

Sydnee: And then replace one meal a day with one of these shakes for weight maintenance. The— A Plexus Lean shake, once you mix it with like— Let's say you mix it with milk, which is what they kind of recommend.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: It's gonna be... around 200ish calories.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So they're recommending that you replace two meals a day with 200 calorie shakes.

Justin: Well, I mean that's the exact— that's the— That's the SlimFast model though I mean. It's not— This is tried and true.

Sydnee: And let me say that every one of their supplements for weight loss has a little carrot, and when you go to the bottom of the screen, you find what the carrot says is "when combined with reduced calorie weight loss diet plan."

Justin: There's also, from what I read, a lot of these have recommended increasing your hydration with them. Like, "You need to take lots of water with these." It's like, "Well, I— That helped, that did it." [chuckles]

Sydnee: They've got— Just to finish it out, they've got some like nutritional things with like antioxidants, superfood supplements, those usual kinda vague wellness claims. Some sleep aids that are melatonin, so probably do help with sleep. I'll give you that.

But then they've got vague stuff, like a Plexus Nerve. Plexus Nerve, what is that? It's a "specially formulated combination of vitamins, minerals,

herbs, and amino acids to help support healthy nerve cells and nervous system. Don't let occasional nerve discomfort—"

Justin: [scoffs]

Sydnee: "— get in the way of having a good day every day."

Justin: Nerve discomfort?

Sydnee: What is that? Do they—?

Justin: That's like nerves— That's like the Appalachian version of like, "My nerves are painin' me." [chuckles]

Sydnee: That's why— I don't know if they mean like neuropathic pain, like pain related to neuropathy— like nerve damage. Or do they mean you— like, "you're on my nerves." Like nerves? I don't know. And let me just say, there are no studies to support any of it, that they show. These products aren't tested.

Even if the individual ingredients have some research out there somewhere that might slightly suggest something, which is the best you could say about any of it. They don't have any studies, and they've never submitted their products for third party testing to purity or accuracy.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So I don't—! This is the wildest. It is all testimonial, I can't find a story. I can't find a narrative. I can't find a— I am just like it is a house of cards that isn't even built on cards. I can't find the bottom cards! What's it built on?! It's floating in mid-air!

Justin: Sydnee. I can answer all of your question. And I'm gonna do it for you.

Sydnee: Thank you.

Justin: Right after we go to the Billing Department.

Sydnee: Okay, let's go.

[transition theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: Okay. There is a lot of information out there about Plexus, and I am mainly focused on their business model, which is not— You don't buy it in stores, people buy it from you directly. It's direct to... the—

You sell directly to other people that you know in your network. And then those people, maybe, you can bring them into the network and say, "Do you wanna sell Plexus with me? Great. Well, you'll sort of be under me, you're an associate that I signed up." Right?

Sydnee: They're down— They— You become a downstream.

Justin: Part of their downstream, right. So. Plexus does not claim that they are... That this is gonna be your full-time income. On their website they say, "Plexus is a part-time side gig, like Uber for most people. But unlike Uber, which can provide an immediate payoff, Plexus is a business where someone can earn income more predictably over time."

So you can see the delineation there being made between [chuckles] some— "A lot of jobs'll give you money right away, but what Plexus has the courage to do is say maybe later!"

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: "You can have the money." Okay, so a lot of my understanding of their business model is direct from them, direct from their... information, and also an author named Melissa Dylan that does a lot of... good work about corporate responsibility and what have you.

So, I'm gonna try to explain to you the Plexus business model, and you gotta promise not to gloss over, because it is incredibly complex. [chuckles] The complexity actually is kinda the point. I'm gonna show you Syd this chart over here... So this chart is their compensation plan summary chart, okay?

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: So you can see here, we have the different ranks of associate, ambassador, senior ambassador, silver ambassador, gold ambassador, senior gold, ruby, senior ruby—

Sydnee: [snorts]

Justin: — emerald, sapphire, and diamond.

Sydnee: [through laughter] Sorry.

Justin: Yes. And you can see hear in this chart that I'm showing Sydnee, there are [clicks tongue rapidly] 10 different columns for each of these, with different requirements on how you make money, okay? The specifics don't matter. The point is, it's incredibly complex, intentionally.

Sydnee: Why— What is the diamond pool and the emerald pool?

Justin: So. Those are dependent on how many people you have recruited.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Into your upline. Into your downline, and they'd be part of your—

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: So that depends on how many people you recruit, and you don't make money from the sales as much as you make money from your recruiting. And that is... something that is not legal in America. You can't pay people to recruit, so they don't, not directly.

Here's how it works. You sign up a bunch of people, and by a bunch of people, to get to the emerald, which is sort of the like... top 1% I think of their— Maybe that's not right.

Sydnee: Oh, so that's not even diamond. Diamond is the top top one, right?

Justin: Yeah, diamond ambassador is the top, top one. So Plexus is not selling this as like a— get rich quick scheme for most people, and if you dig down into the data, that is 100% true.

So from their own numbers, from their own income disclosure statement in 2020, the top 1% of brand ambassadors made an average of \$37,553 annually. 50% of the top 1% made more than 14,875, 'kay? According to their own data, their average earnings is \$544 per year.

Now, what are the problems with this? Number one, that does not include the money that they spent to help build their business.

Sydnee: I was gonna say, how about how many people lose money?

Justin: Ann— That includes the ann— Well, if you think about it, if that includes the annual membership fee, which is 39— 35 bucks, payment of renewal fees, purchase of products for personal consumption, purchase of product samples, shipping costs, transportation costs, training and educational expenses, business equipment, travel expenses, and miscellaneous costs.

So that could— that all eats into that average of 544 per year. Now, that's only the— that's not even the wildest part, Sydnee. The wildest part is that they used an average. Do you wanna talk, for a second, with me about the difference between an average and a median?

Sydnee: Sure.

Justin: 'Cause this is something people love to— Do you really?

Sydnee: I mean, I know, but go ahead. Yes.

Justin: Okay, so an average is you take all the numbers, and then you divide 'em by the total number of numbers.

Sydnee: Right, right.

Justin: Okay. In the data set. A median looks at an entire data set and says, "Here's the number that's in the middle of this data set.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: So, is there— if the Plexus... ambassadors are making \$3, and then you have eight in the middle that are making \$20, and then you have one person at the end that's making a million dollars...

Sydnee: Your average is going to be way higher than your median.

Justin: It's gonna be— Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Which is 20.

Sydnee: Right. Right.

Justin: Median's the 20, it's the middle number in the set of numbers.

Sydnee: What's the median?

Justin: Well we don't know. They don't—

Sydnee: Oh, they don't tell you.

Justin: They don't tell you that date.

Sydnee: Ohhh, okay.

Justin: I don't have access to that data, that's not what they report. What they report is the average of that income. So, we don't actually know. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Is— You don't actually know what you can expect to earn, because of both of those two factors. Now why is that? Okay, so this is the part that's gonna get a little complex, so hang with me for a sec, okay? You don't start— You— It costs 35 bucks a year to just join, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: So that's your base thing. \$35 is your trust— your user sign up, I think it's an annual thing.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: And by the way, Plexus if you're listening, if I misconstrue anything, please let me know. sawbones@maximumfun.org, happy to issue a correction.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: 'Cause In my limited— In my limited experience as a business reporter, this is the best of my recolle— my understanding.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: So.

Sydnee: Well when they email you, could they send me— I would love to see the links to all the studies they have that show that these products do the things that they sort of claim that they do. That they suggest gently that they might possibly do.

Justin: Okay. So. As an associate, the— that is what 35 bucks gets you, to an associate level. If you wanna actually make money, then you have to become an ambassador. Now an ambassador, the big difference is they have a backup order in place.

What does that mean? It means that to become an ambassador, you have to... you have to have an order per month of \$100 worth of products, to be set for you to become an ambassador. Okay?

Sydnee: Is that to— For you, or for you to distribute?

Justin: For you to buy to distribute.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: You have to buy at least a mil— a hundred bucks in product every—

Sydnee: To distribute. Got it. Okay.

Justin: To distribute, right, every month, to become an ambassador, just if you wanna make money from it.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: If you wanted to do it, you know, [wheezes] for fun, I guess, you don't have to do this. But if you wanna make money from it, which everybody does, you become an ambassador.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: \$100 of product a month, minimum. That doesn't sound that bad if you think you're like, "I'm gonna be startin' my own business. I'm gonna be moving a lot more than \$100 a month in product, right?"

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Well, you don't earn commission on your first \$100 of sales. So... basically... You buy a hundred— You are guaranteeing this company "I will be 100— buy \$100 a month in product."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: You don't start earning commission until you've sold past \$100 in product.

Sydnee: So that first \$100 was on you.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah. So what they want is so when you see somebody who's making a bunch of money, they— the problem is, they don't care if you sell it. They care that you buy it to sell.

Sydnee: Got it. Okay.

Justin: This is— And this is— I'm pulling now pretty much directly from... Melissa Dylan's report, because she's obviously a lot smarter than me, but this is what she says.

And I'm gonna t— bleep out a curse word, but "Based on what I've learned, my guess is that the creators of Plexus don't give a bleep about

product. They know they're toeing the line legally with their claims, and they know it will work for a very finite period of time.

They also know that their money's in wholesales, because they can make a lot of money from it without having to pay salespeople. That's why they incentivise recruitment over product sales, and why many of the annoying Facebook posts are about how great it is to work for Plexus over how great their products are."

So what they want is a bunch of people guaranteeing to give them \$100 a month, for the opportunity to make more than \$100 a month. And nobody paying—

Sydnee: They're not looking for repeat customers.

Justin: They don't— They're not looking for customers period. The model is the business. And now I wanted to return to something that we were talking about with the emerald commissions, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: You can't pay people to recruit for an MLM, it doesn't work— you can't do that, that's illegal.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Okay? So the way that they get around this is that when you get up into the upper tier, emerald is one of those very high-level tiers, it's the... They— You get into the Emerald Commission Pool. Which is worth 3% of the company's gross product volume, which according to this \$225 million dollars, 3% of that is \$6 million, split between the emerald and higher. They call 'em "Jewel Ambassadors."

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Okay? So, you... recruit enough people, and then you get a share of the company's profits. But they're not paying you to recruit people. So I think, and this is again all my understanding, but I think that that's why when I say that they don't... care about the product.

Sydnee: That's why I can't find any of this stuff.

Justin: 'Cause they don't care about the product.

Sydnee: That's— It's— That makes a lot of sense because that's what— Usually with wellness products, and this— Okay. I'm— This is just me theorizing. I don't know what the motivations of the people who started— of Tarl and his friends who started Plexus, I don't know what their motivations are.

Justin: I have a good guess, go on. [wheezes]

Sydnee: I know that he likes to golf, and he's a Sea Hawks fan, 'cause that's on the website. It's on the main website, I didn't like— I didn't try to search him anywhere else, that's on like the Plexus "Meet the Founder" website.

In a lot of the wellness products that we talk about, I usually can find like the story from the founder, who like had some sort of pain or illness or problem, found some sort of natural or ancient or, you know, something. Sometimes it's based on another culture that they're appropriating.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Some sort of solution, and it worked wonders for them, and now they wanna share it with the world.

Justin: Mm. Right.

Sydnee: That's usually the narrative.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That is underneath these things.

Justin: Right, "I found this root and the doctor said I was done for, but this root helped me."

Sydnee: And I'm—

Justin: "Thank you, this root."

Sydnee: And—

Justin: “I’m selling it for \$100.” [chuckles]

Sydnee: And the question you always ask when you read those, and I think it varies from product to product, is this a true believer who is, you know, misguided but not malicious? Or is this just “I wanna make money”? Is this profit? Is this a profiteer? What this sounds like to me is that there’s not even an illusion of true belief here.

Justin: Right. Exactly.

Sydnee: There’s no— I mean, you don’t have to question like— Because if you really believe in the products that you’re selling... If you really believe these will help people achieve hope, health, and happiness, then I think you put time into research and studies that show how effective they are.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: You put some effort into that.

Justin: Yeah. Hey, but listen, you had your time. You had your first half of the episode. I need to tell you more bad stuff about Plexus, Sydnee.

Sydnee: [chuckles] This is— It’s just really shocking to me that they don’t even fake it.

Justin: Do you wanna—

Sydnee: Like that it’s just—

Justin: Hmm, that’s weird. You wanna talk about an FTC letter sent to them in 2020. This warning letter from the FTC said, “Some examples—” So the entire letter reads— It’s quite long, so let me... zero in here.

“This letter is to provide you with information about laws and regulations enforced by the FTC that may bear upon your business activities. Some examples of COVID-19 or treatment claims made by your business opportunity participants or representatives include a post stating ‘#plexus #coronavirus #prep #vitamins #health #covid19’ next to an image of

Plexus worldwide products, and the text 'boost your immunity with our everyday wellness combo'.

Or another post, '#viruscoronaworried? I've been boosting my immune system for several years with high quality Plexus supplements, and you can too!'"

Sydnee: Are they—

Justin: "Be sensible, not careful."

Sydnee: Are they— I'm assuming the answer is yes, but I feel like they have so many loopholes for this stuff. The company Plexus, are they responsible for the claims their ambassadors make?

Justin: No, they are independent contractors. They are not— They would say they are not responsible. The FTC is saying "Come get your boy."

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: See, everybody's out here getting absolutely buckwild.

Sydnee: So can— But that's what I was ask— But like, can they just continue to say like, "Not our problem"?

Justin: This is what—

Sydnee: "We didn't tell 'em to say that."

Justin: This is—

Sydnee: 'Cause I'm sure they send 'em a handbook, right? They probably send 'em a book and say, "Say this," and if they say something else.

Justin: When— When Melissa Dylan says like, "a house of cards," the co— This is— She actually says, "The company has no long-term plans, they are designed to milk as much profit from their ambassadors as they can until someone shuts them down."

They're also banking on the likelihood that any finds related to outrageous and untrue claims won't be higher than their overall earnings. A fine will be a slap on the wrist, and they'll walk away with cash in the bank."

So, the— this is what— When you say things like, "Well, it— can't they be held responsible for this?" I mean, eventually.

Sydnee: They're counting on it.

Justin: You have to imagine that the law— They are right now— It seems to me, as an outside observer, that they are right now trying to skirt every grey area they can, just to make as much money as they can.

Sydnee: You said something, by the way, that I think is probably worth pointing out as as being true. You said that like—

Justin: Hmm!

Sydnee: — a lot of people, when they start these products, they are going to respond well to them initially, and so that's going to reenforce the idea that that was \$100 well spent. Okay.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It's true if you take things with diuretics like caffeine or with laxatives, you know, like high bulky fibres and stuff like that. If you take those sorts of supplements and you do have a lot of fluid loss through... peeing and pooping.

Justin: Yes, thank you.

Sydnee: To be blunt. You probably will lose some weight initially. It's largely fluid weight. If you're taking a ton of caffeine, I mean that could well suppress your appetite to an extent, and so temporarily, you might see that you do lose a few pounds, or you feel more awake. Maybe you do feel more energised, because of the massive amounts of caffeine.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Deifnately those things could happen.

Justin: Immediate effect, probably something.

Sydnee: They will not be long term, and they're not— There's no proof that these are safe, by the way. That's the other thing. They have not proven— They haven't done testing to prove that these are safe. So not only do they not have evidence to say they're effective, they don't have evidence to say they're safe.

So you're really— you're playing with your health, with your wellness, with your— You're gambling your hope, health, and happiness by taking these products.

Justin: And I don't think they've learned their lesson. I found one ad from a Facebook— on Facebook from a rep...

"Just ca— Just got off a call with our fabulous Dr Hartman, head of research and development, and he educated us that Plexus balance and slim hunger control have key ingredients that work in the same way as Hollywood's 'skinny shot'," which of course referring— yeah.

So they say— This is from the ad, they have like little things pointing to the container. "Helps maintain blood glucose levels already in the normal range." Whoa! Can you imagine?!

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: That's pretty cool! "Supports weight management." So that means also noth— I mean that means nothing.

Sydnee: It mean—

Justin: "Supports weight management" means nothing. You can manage your weight and have it go in any— literally any direction. Like, "delays digestion and reduces the absorption of carbs and sugars," "reduces the glycaemic index of carbs and sugars." That—

Sydnee: That—

Justin: That doesn't mean anything. I mean, that means nothing.

Sydnee: No, and it's really, I mean, you know, it's playing on— I feel like they're talking about all these other wellness things that a lot of people do, but I think the— they include this idea of weight management.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: In a lot of their packages that aren't even— Like if you click on gut health, you're not here looking for weight management, necessarily, but they are going to feat— They have systems within gut health that include their weight management supplements. Which is such a damaging— I mean there's so much of this that's bad.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But like that's such a damaging thing, like, "Well, you know your gut would be healthier if you took this weight loss supplement," is— That's the implication there.

Justin: By the way, Dr Hartman, our fabulous Dr Hartman, has a PhD in Exercise Physiology. Not medical doctor, just for the record.

Sydnee: [sighs] This is very— This is one of the most frustrating— I mean there are a lot of things you have tal— we've talked about on this show where, I mean, they're kinda playing around with like, "Ah, this is an herbal thing, we don't really know, no-one's ever gonna do the study. It seems pretty harmless, I don't know. People are always—"

There's a lot of that out there. This seems really straightforward, like, "we're puttin' fibre and caffeine in a bunch of stuff."

Justin: I mean, but it's not straightforward, and that's what's the problem, right?

Sydnee: But it should be.

Justin: They make it— I know, but it's specifically not. Like they're making it not, right? And that's the problem with the business—

If you have a legitimate business, your compensation plan summary chart shouldn't need 100 cells in Excel to like demonstrate how you get paid to

sell the thing. Like... [sighs] It's intentionally obfuscating, I think, the truth that statistically speaking, nobody's making money.

Sydnee: Well it—

Justin: Just like every other frigging MLM.

Sydnee: It kinda sounds like if you imagine that there's a person at the top.

Justin: Huh, yeah.

Sydnee: Who's making a lot of money.

Justin: Isn't that interesting.

Sydnee: And then as you go down, you have like broader and broader levels, where people are making less and less money as you get—

Justin: Isn't that interesting.

Sydnee: And those broader levels working down.

Justin: I'm also grossly simplifying their payment structure. You should look into it. There's like questions of primary legs, and it's a whole thing. So hey listen, that's the deal with Plexus, in case you're curious.

Sydnee: I'm mad. [chuckles]

Justin: Thank you so much for— [chuckles] Sydnee's so mad.

Sydnee: I just— It made me mad to read the whole thing.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: It's just— There's no veneer. I would— I would say this, there's no studies to show that it's safe or effective, or even that— I mean the—

Again, there's no third-party studies for purity. That means that there's nobody on the outside confirming— I am not suggesting that what you're getting, you know, what they say in the bottle wasn't in the bottle, I don't

know. Nobody— I mean like there was nobody outside of the company who did a study to say that for sure.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: That's. Terrifying to me, as— a scientist.

Justin: This is the— Nothing should be taken as medical advice and opinion on this show. This is just my personal opinion. If you know somebody [chuckles] that's taking stuff from Plexus, you should sneak into their house and throw it in the trash. That is my personal opinion.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and I mean, if you are wanting to... have a side gig to make extra money for your family, this would not be a route to go.

Justin: Thank you so much for listening to our podcast, we hope you enjoyed yourself. That is going to do it for us. Thank to the Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks to you for listening.

[theme music fades in]

Justin: We really sure appreciate it. That is gonna do it for us. Until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a whole in your head.

[outro music plays]

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