**Candle Delirious: A writer gets lost and found in the candle space**

**Lisa Richmon**

**CANDLE CURVEBALL**

I’m wearing leggings with an eye-catching neon colored emoji pattern. My black tee says: Chick Lit: Psychotherapy + Aromatherapy.”

I walk into the tank and introduce myself to six investors, known as sharks on the television show “Shark Tank.”

I give each shark a personalized candle, starting with Robert Herjavec. He is The Dog Champion. He sniffs and barks.

Lori Greiner gets The Heart Filler; Kevin O’Leary gets The Wedding Boss.

 The Girls’ Girl goes to Barbara Corcoran

And to Mark Cuban, The Overthinker.

**Moments earlier, I made Shark Tank history. I offered the sharks a 50% stake in my business for *zero* money.**

“This I gotta hear,” says Mark Cuban, placing his palm over his face revealing mild disgust. I hand him The Overthinker, for which he rewards me with eye contact and a smile.

I walk back to the ‘pitcher’s’ mound where entrepreneurs stand before the sharks pitching their products and inventions. Mark Cuban says, “You got that right, Lisa, I need a ‘braincation.’”

“This smells great,” says Lori Grienier. “I love that they are 100% vegan. Lisa, how did you come up with the idea for candle personalities?”

“I’m a journalist and writing coach. So, in 2013, when I was walking the streets of New York after leading a branding workshop at General Assembly, all I heard was young girls talking about dates gone bad. Their dating drama inspired The Picker Flicker.

I hoped that the word “picker,” could be candle code for the device girls use to ‘pick’ their mates and dates. It didn’t occur to me it would make some people think of boogers. When I expressed concern to my candlemaker, what he told me convinced to ‘take it to the back and shoot it.’”

Everybody laughs at my application of “Mr. Wonderful’s” famous line.

‘Take it to the back and shoot it,’ is Kevin O’Leary’s missive to entrepreneurs whose products he believes will never make money.

 “Here’s the thing,” I tell them. “People LOVE candles and they love stories.”

“Tell me about The Girls Girl,” said Barbara. “It’s got a very crisp scent. What am I smelling?”

“You’re smelling cassis and fir with a dusting of citrus. Chick Lit was never meant to be just an amazing candle. That’s why I call it Aromatherapy + Psychotherapy. When I conceived Chick Lit, nobody was putting transformative messaging on candles… or any products. Now look at how brands like Third Love market their mission. Bethany Frankel went crazy over Snarky Teas. I believe Chick Lit led the charge.”

“The Wedding Boss would be a nice addition to my bridal business,” says Kevin.”

“Your packaging is really sharp,” Barbara adds. “Really top of the line.”

“This is a perfect gift for dog lovers. That market is on fire,” says Robert. “What are your sales?”

“I don’t know,” I blurt out. “That’s why I need your help.”

Everyone laughs. Mark Cuban grunts.

The Hard NO is universal. Fighting back tears, I leave the tank.

In a panic, I wake up, check my Instagram and realize my “Shark Tank” debut was a bad dream.

REALITY TV

I’m awake now and Chick Lit candles is real. I know this because there are 150 bright orange and fuchsia Wedding Boss candles in my garage.

The idea for Chick Lit candle personalities was conceived when my friend Kim came back from Arizona with a sweet-smelling candle, in a simple brown kraft box that said, ‘Lick me all Over.’

“We can do so much better than this,” Kim said.

I took it as a dare.

The idea to tell stories on candles morphed into something more concrete when I found a California-based MFA student on the internet. Morgan and I bonded right away. While finishing her thesis on anti-shaming feminine product design, she instantly immersed herself in finding the look and logo of a Chick Lit bundled package unlike anything on the market. Candle. Scent. Packaging. Messaging.

With mood boards on Pinterest and four distinct personalities emerging, I began to realize that the Chick Lit concept was no joke. We gave the messaging its signature stamp (Rant + Chant = Intention) and printed it on an eco-friendly hangtag. The rant was edgy; the chant inspired, and the intention, transformational. Rant + Chant = Intention

**LAUNCH TIME**

Apparently, the finished product, with its various moving parts was well-executed. Affirmations were almost universal. Photographer and ad agency founder Mark Atkinson said that he felt that same sense of anticipation from a Chick Lit reveal that he experienced opening a new Apple product.

More than just a fetching design and nuanced scents. It had all the feels and the smells. No other product on the market had that going for it. ‘How can I go wrong,’ I thought.

Ready to move forward and test the product in the marketplace, I put some real skin in the game and invested north of $25k in personal funds in the production of 2500 eco-friendly recyclable containers from Chicago Paper Tube, pure-soy, KOBO candles and Morgan Sterns’ design brilliance.

The only negative response I really got was from a buyer in Richmond, Virginia, whose merch I loved, and feedback I begged for. Because I was gunning for brutally honest feedback, this person took the time to craft a long, honest skewering of the candle collection.

“I cannot stop thinking about “Sex in the City” when I look at them.  The Over Thinker is the most successful one.  But The Picker Flicker…is terrible.  Every single staff member, customer, anyone that saw these candles asked me if it was booger scented.  I do not see myself in any of these types.  I do not see any of my friends or family either.

Ironically people who saw the candles singled out her store as a potential wholesale partner. She didn’t share that view, but she did take the time to make suggestions about the hang tags that I applied and benefitted greatly from. That said, I can’t lie. That last line still stings.

Undeterred, I still liked that Chick Lit was a hybrid—a greeting card in a candle, despite her thoughts to the contrary which she clearly expressed in the long version, not recounted here. Her points were valid, painfully constructive and thankfully not consensus generating.

The debut collection (4 photographed) immediately grabbed the attention of buyers from Cool Hunting, Anthropologie, Indigo Booksellers, Candlefish, and boutiques around the world.

The Dieline featured Chick Lit in its site, triggering another new wave of interest from buyers, and giving us serious street cred as a new candle darling.

More affirmations:

* An Anthropologie buyer called to express interest in a customized candle.
* An A-list celebrity, passionate about animal rights, burned The Dog Champion in her home while hosting a baby shower for another celebrity friend.
* Blake Lively’s Preserve.us was created to feature goods and brands that make a difference in people’s lives. Her editor found out about my line through our mutual friend, and reached out to me under the impression that Chick Lit stories would resonate with Lively and fit the intention behind Preserve.us. Unfortunately Preserve was not well-preserved. Lively let it go shortly after I received this e-mail rating her preferences.

Hi Lisa,

Here's the order Blake liked them in!

 1 The Girls Girl 2 The Wedding Boss 3 The picker flicker 4 The Over Thinker

Thanks!

As excited as I was to share this news with my millennials, the most rewarding Chick Lit moment came from Kimpton Hotel’s Maggie Lang. Her response to my e-mail about our potential brand alignment was nectar from the entrepreneur gods:

I love your line – so fun! We’re always looking for fun new products to consider. We do a lot of surprise and delights and some of these would be perfect. Would you mind sending us a few samples along with wholesale pricing? Look forward to seeing some samples and hopefully spreading some smiles with these. Good stuff!

Hi Lisa,

Yes, thanks so much! We love them and I’d like to actually place an order to ship to our Surprise & Delight fulfillment vendor (Client Joy). We will add the drop ship address in our order (to their warehouse

**Shit I Did Right.**

* Followed my gut and said ‘no way’ to influencers who approached me repeatedly to promote Chick Lit in one single Instagram post – in exchange for thousands of dollars worth of produced goods. A mentor sat me down at my coffee shop in Virginia Beach and told me “influencers are the future of social media marketing.” True as that may be, it felt disingenuous and I stood my ground.
* Blazed a new trail. Created something completely authentic, positive, and eye-catching.
* Collaborated with a young designer who got my vision, made the process a joy, and brought it to life
* Found a candlemaker with infinite experience and patience, and unbeatable product integrity
* Put aspirational messaging on candles
* Used my journalist’s skills to successfully pitch Kimpton Hotels
* Led a movement that made it fun to celebrate yourself and others
* Put personal attachment aside. Leveraged advice from Louis Hotchkiss, of KOBO candles with decades of experience selling upscale candles at high-end trade shows. He made me realize that The Picker Flicker could turn customers off, (picker=booger) and if that happens, I could risk those people not giving the rest of the line a fair shot. I then donated 250 The Picker Flickers to an art school.

**Shit I’m Figuring Out**

* What is Chick Lit? A lifestyle business, a cottage industry, a hobby or candle poo-poo on a platter (as ‘Mr. Wonderful’ on “Shark Tank” would say).
* I’m a poor traveler. Virginia Beach, where I live, isn’t a hub for a candle business. There’s a reason so many independent candle and curated gift box companies like PF Candle and Simone Leblanc are conceived and sustained in and around Los Angeles.

**Shit I Wish Someone Told Me**

* **Scents are everything. That’s what people care about**. I focused a disproportionate amount of money and energy on messaging and packaging.
* Quality and originality alone won’t cut it. To be a legit business, you need to pinpoint the right distribution channel for your product and assess frequently.
* The candle sweet spot is under $30.
* Hangtags are a merchandising nightmare. Rant + Chant on the back of the tube made more sense.
* Maker bias. Chick Lit personalities don’t just sell themselves. Once people meet me, and hear the stories behind the candles, they’re sold. But retailers can’t just put them out and expect them to fly off the shelves.
* Candles are heavy and hard to transport. Getting to shows that were often far from my home in Virginia, was a costly challenge.
* Know your numbers. Being ignorant to the numbers is indefensible.
* Budget for samples, or have a buy-in plan established for potential wholesale partners. If you rely on wholesale business, they want to test the scent.
* Don’t be surprised when one out of every 15 people who e-mail or call to say “I can’t wait to carry your line” actually place an order.
* If the daughter, wife and best friend of CPAs can make these mistakes, anyone can.
* Don’t even think about starting a business without a solid business partner or advisor with some skin in the game.

**Shit I blew off that someone tried to tell me. (Thank you, Louis Hotchkiss)**

* Scents are everything. (Then packaging and messaging.)
* Sourcing materials and tackling minimum requirements is essential.
* Accounting matters. Good books and records *are* sexy! Know your numbers. It’s the foundation of your business.
* Profit goes to reinvestment and is essential to obtain a steady cash flow and operate optimally.
* Don't expect your initial investment to come back to you after your initial inventory is sold. In fact, you will likely require a further injection of capital after initial launch to fund your next round. So even though you are putting a portion aside for inventory replacement, you may need to purchase double the inventory to accommodate growth.  So, rather than transactional chapters, you are really trying to generate a steady stream of cash flow to operate a healthy business from.
* Pay close attention to customers.

Like a sick dog whose quality of life you question, on whom you spend thousands of dollars on medical bills, Chick Lit has good days and bad days. One day I’ve made peace and am ‘putting it down,’ and then I see Snarky Teas on “Shark Tank,” and get sucked back in. I can’t help but see the similarities, and how quickly Bethany Frankel made an offer to invest in that company.

My dream is to create more custom candle branding for socially forward art hotels, venues and companies that have something to say. My superpower is finding your superpower.

**A LOVE LETTER TO MY BABY:**

You might not be a big brand or even a cottage business, but you’re mine and I love what we brought to the candle party! We led a movement. We showed how cool it is to honor yourself with the same gusto you have for others. And we made it fun to revel in other people’s successes.

It’s gratifying to know that the Chick Lit package—scent, design and messaging made a difference in people’s lives when they needed it most.

R.I.P. Chick Lit. Rest in Pause