

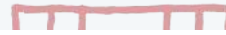
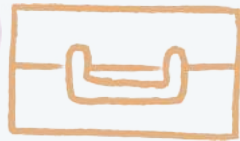
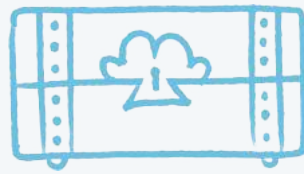
The
**TRUNK
SHOW**

With RW ELEPHANT

SEASON 3 EPISODE 2



RIISING FROM THE ASHES
WITH **ANN KING** FOUNDER OF
BORROW CURATED FURNITURE + DESIGN



WELCOME TO THE TRUNK SHOW,
hosted by Allison Howell and brought to you by RW
Elephant. Episode 2 features **Ann King of Borrow Curated
Furniture + Design.**



Ann started Borrow out of her garage in 2012 with the belief that people need local art and design in their lives. Borrow provides modern, made + antique furniture for the events and homes of the community. She has a BA in Creative Writing and a childhood history in theatre. When she's not at Borrow, you'll find her at home with the people she loves.



What's in this Episode:

- How Ann started borrow with \$7,000
- A tragic event that destroyed nearly everything
- An efficient and effective system for furniture repair
- Her method for keeping herself and her team accountable
- Learning how to “chill” as a boss and fostering culture
- Being a role model, reaching milestones and more!



QUOTES:

“You're not starting over. You're gonna go in and rebuild as an absolute expert. When you first started this business, you were not an expert. You didn't know what the hell you were doing. ”

- Ann King

“We always have kept good records. So I was literally able to just press that button on RW Elephant and spit out exactly how much stuff we had.”

- Ann King

“I'm way less attached to the collection. It's stuff. And probably the biggest takeaway is, you think it's about the furniture. It is not about the furniture. Not at all. It is about the people. It is about the people that you work for, that you work with. It's about your community.”

- Ann King

“When you call OSHA in and you say, I want to do this the right way, can you show me how to do it? They love you for that. They understand that you're just trying to do things the right way. So it's not scary at all. It's very, very informative and helpful.”

- Ann King

“One thing we did invest in, and actually it was a company that we found at Lend & Gather. We hired Upright Labs to come in and give us a 150 page deck of how to reset the warehouse for primal efficiency. So that was massive and a big investment, but totally worth it.”

- Ann King

“I didn't realize that like management was about empowering and supporting. It's not about telling and teaching.”

- Ann King

Episode Transcription

Hello and welcome to the Trunk Show. I'm your host, Allison Howell, here to talk with leading professionals about their event rental businesses, hard earned wisdom, and ongoing adventures in the industry.

The show is brought to you by RW Elephant, mighty inventory management software designed to help you conquer the chaos in your event rental business and reclaim your creativity, because the world needs more of the beautiful events and environments you create!

In this episode, you'll hear my conversation with Ann King, founder of Borrow Curated Furniture + Design in Cleveland, Ohio. Ann shares how she started her bootstrapped business 12 years ago in her garage and found the strength to rebuild it after tragedy struck. We'll also hear her smart takes and actionable insights into how she manages her trendsetting event rental business.

Alright, let's start the show!

Ann King: I started with seven farm tables, and I think 70 chairs. I put together the plan where I would earn money, then invest some more in the inventory, earn and then invest, earn and invest. And that kind of cycle of slowly growing, which we've maintained for the past 12 years.

So, we've always kind of fallen that same model. I didn't have to invest in some huge showroom and have a front window. It was literally out of the back of our insurance business's garage. I think the initial investment in Borrow was something like \$7,000.

Allison Howell: Well look at how that's returned for you. I mean there's a lot of sweat equity in there as well, right?

Ann King: Yeah.

Allison Howell: Yeah. So, okay, you have this 7,000 worth of tables and chairs. You saw the scalability potential. What was your vision at that point when you started the business?

Ann King: Really, it was to do custom furniture for events. That's where it started. We are going to bring the cool stuff to market that's not here.

That one vein has always stuck. We don't typically buy things that other companies in our market have because we just do a sub rental, but being first and also being as creative as we



could with the collection itself. Also, the same vein of modern, made, and antique, the collection of all three, was a big part of it too.

Allison Howell: And so when you started, you saw, okay, there's some scalability here. Did you imagine, okay, in one year, I'll have 20 tables and in 10 years, I'll have 20 trucks? Or like, what were you imagining?

Ann King: That's a great question. No, because people are like, could you ever imagine it would get this way? And the answer very quickly to that is yes, that was the plan.

By year 10, I wanted it to be a seven-figure business. I wrote out a check to myself for year 10. This is what I want as CEO monthly. It was very much planned out. This is my goal after year two, year three, this is my goal to year five. Every year I kind of redo my business plan, but ultimately it's always working in that main goal.

Allison Howell: Wow. Okay. So, um, it seems like goals are a real driver for you. I'm

Ann King: I'm totally that person that likes to check the box off, did that, done. You know what I mean? So that's more motivating to me than money, to be honest.

Allison Howell: 2012, how many events did you do, ballpark?

Ann King: I would say I think it's like in the 20s, maybe.

Allison Howell: Okay, and that's with the seven tables and the 70 chairs, or you're adding stuff constantly?

Ann King: So I also stole some upholstered furniture from my dad's office. There were three couches. There was a couple barrels. The old bottles to use as candlesticks and vessels for flowers. So, it wasn't just those items.

There were a couple different things in there.

Allison Howell: What were your early clients like? Were they DIY brides? Were they early adopters?

Ann King: Well, some of the initial ones were just family. You know what I mean? I was like, please, you can have this for next to nothing. I need photos of real events.



I realized pretty quickly that planning companies were who I needed to get in front of. I knew they were going to be the people that wanted to push the new items and have really cool events, but also people that would have the budget to spend more on a farm table opposed to like a folding table.

So pretty quickly on, I would be like, I'll do the styled shoot for you for free. I can bring this for. So I was getting these styled shoots and building relationships with planners.

Allison Howell: How did you go about research at that point? You didn't have any experience in the industry, so what were you doing?

Just looking at websites or looking up statistics? How did you find information?

Ann King: Lots of phone calls. Definitely the internet. I'd ask around a lot. How do you know this person? Who's doing the best here? I'm a natural question asker. I am very interested in a lot of things. So it was a lot of face to face.

Allison Howell: It seems like you kind of have to have some confidence in order to go into a market you don't know anything about and just ask those questions.

Ann King: I've never really had a lot of confidence personally, but I feel like I've always had a lot of interest in things.

Allison Howell: So I'm wondering about your sales strategy or how you continued to build relationships with your clients and also your collection.

Do you feel like that curiosity is what fueled those things? Or did you have some other strategy in that process?

Ann King: I was always good at sales, even back in insurance. But that's because I'm interested in learning about people. So I'd be like, what do you need? And really trying to understand what somebody needs, how you can solve their problem.

I also was good at picking for people. I could very easily talk to somebody for a few minutes and realize what they're going to like, and I've always been a very visual person. So I can imagine a room without seeing the room, that type of thing. So it was a combination of listening to people hearing what they want and be like, Okay, this is how you can make it even better.

But also trying to push people a little bit. I think that's a big thing. I have never really considered myself an order taker. When I'm in front of somebody, I want to be able to give them something



I've never wanted to see a picture. I know there's pictures out there, but I haven't looked at one.

Gone.

Allison Howell: Borrow was on fire. You're in New York with your friends. No one was hurt, right?

Ann King: Exactly. Luckily the fire did start a Friday night and I knew the schedule.

I knew nobody was in the building, but we definitely went over that. Is anybody hurt? Is everybody okay? Accounting for the employees. Where are they?

Unfortunately, so I'm outside on the street corner, crying, talking to my husband and being like, okay, I gotta get home.

While I'm on that street corner. One of my really good friends who's in the business calls me, I'm like, what the hell? It's like 1130 at night. Why is she calling me on a Friday night? And it's my friend Heather. And I'm crying. I'm like, Heather. And she goes, I know. And I go, what do you mean, you know?

And she said there was a wedding planner that found out about the fire and was telling everybody about it. Now all of a sudden I'm like gossip all over town.

Allison Howell: Right. So, it's not just a fire. It's not just crisis mode. Now it's putting out the fire on top of the fire.

Ann King: Exactly. People are asking, are you going to be able to do their weddings next weekend?

It was so much. I went back to the hotel room. I need to put together a plan. We need to contact every single one of our clients, it needs to come from me.

Allison Howell: So you go straight back to the hotel and contact your clients and say, Hey, we've had a fire. We're dealing with it. Or what did you say?

Ann King: So, well, the first thing I did was. I have an awesome relationship with our PR person. So I called Tom and I was like, I need some type of statement. I'm so emotional and I'm not within my wits right now. Can you please help me construct something to say? So he actually wrote it for me.



And then me and two other staff members reached out via email to everyone that night. I immediately got a flight home and I went straight into the office. I think I was up for something like 48 straight hours or something crazy. Or maybe I just stayed home and went through the computer. But I remember having that computer up and calling everybody and being like, yeah, we're going to take care of you guys.

We're not just going to leave you stranded. We told everybody we will help you find an alternative to what you have with Borrow and we're not leaving you alone. And the way we're going to kind of handle this is just by priority. So the people that have a wedding coming up next week are going to be the first people we take care of and then just go down the line.

Allison Howell: What were the reactions?

Ann King: So nice. Everybody was so nice. Understanding. Lovely.

This part always makes me cry too, but we were given so much grace. And I was so thankful for that, that so many people were so nice about things. And also, so much grace by other people in the industry, other rental companies that stepped up and just gave us stuff.

Allison Howell: So, when you're calling these people and telling them we're going to find you stuff, we're going to help, how are you imagining you're finding this stuff? Are you thinking you're going to go buy it all? Are you thinking you're going down to Meemaw's and picking up stuff from her shop?

Are you thinking that you're going to go get it from a rental company two states away? How are you imagining that you're going to actually fulfill these orders at this point?

Ann King: So the way we kind of put it is to manage expectations, it's not going to be the same and it might be a little bit more standard rentals.

But we were going to just do subs from people in our market and whatever was available in the market and that we would eat the cost of the difference if there was a difference. Another stroke of luck was I had already been looking for a new building from that old building. We had three truckloads full of stuff.

It needed to go somewhere. So I need to find a warehouse, but I already knew about this location that we're in right now because I had been looking for new space. So I called up those landlords and I was like, can we land here? So I think by that Tuesday, we were actually in a new spot with nothing in it. It was just a big empty room and the stuff that was on the trucks.



Ann King: Oh, the Shou Sugi ban table. So yeah, Shou Sugi ban is a Japanese technique where instead of staining the wood, you burn the wood.

I'm like, we got to do something to give homage to this dumpster fire. So we did the Shou Sugi ban tables to start. That was our first new item that came off the racks, which for the record, they all had to be stained because Shou Sugi ban, while gorgeous, is not an awesome rental, but it was a great story for the year after the fire.

Allison Howell: So you were pretty systematic in sort of how you rebuilt your collection. Can you tell us about your buying process now? Does that pattern still influence the way you buy now? Are you looking at that ROI? Are you looking at that data or are there other factors that you're considering?

Ann King: Because we're many times bringing the first of its kind to market a lot of times with our inventory. I feel like I've really watched trends a lot more than I do ROI.

We call it a trend arc. How long is a piece going to be in style? What makes it timeless? I'm thinking a lot about that. What's coming down the pipeline next? And what's going to have some legs, you know, not just be in style for one season. That influences it a ton, and then we sometimes have to give it a full year or two to see what the actual ROI is going to be, because sometimes if it's new new, people haven't seen it in events, it takes a while to catch on.

I remember when we did our Mila chair right after the fire, and that took a good 18 months to really start moving.

Allison Howell: What is the Mila chair?

Ann King: It's a chair that we actually did design in house. It's a bentwood chair and then it has a rattan circular back. You can kind of see them everywhere now. It was a revival from an antique.

Allison Howell: Are there any other lessons that you learned as a result of this experience with the fire?

Ann King: Yeah, I'm way less attached to the collection. It's stuff. It is stuff and probably the biggest takeaway is you think it's about the furniture, it is not about the furniture.

Not at all. It is about the people. It is about the people that you work for, that you work with. It's about your community. That's really what kind of makes it. But I'm not attached to stuff. If it doesn't have a good ROI, if we couldn't sell it, bye. She's leaving, no place for you.



I had 20 dumpsters, 20 of those huge container dumpsters of stuff pulled out of the fire of the old location, 20.

And I was like that, I'm never doing that again.

Allison Howell: Just practically, do you have any tips for how to prevent fires moving forward?

Ann King: You can bring the fire department into your operation, and they love coming. They can come give you pointers and everything.

I can tell you what started the fire was spontaneous combustion.

So for anybody that is building or using stain or anything like that, we had our lead people trained, but we didn't have a company wide training for those items.

Allison Howell: For disposal of rags and brushes and that sort of thing?

Ann King: Yea I think we narrowed it down to exactly what started it. We usually bring stain with us.

If a table gets nicked or something, they'll do like a quick repair on site. And we think what happened is the stain spilled in the truck and just one of our helpers, that's not a lead or anything, cleaned it up and threw it in the trash can. And it spontaneously combusted and just burst into flames.

Allison Howell: And you think, what are the odds?

Ann King: I know, but yeah, you can bring in the fire department. Also too, OSHA will come by. And these are all free resources that you can just have come by. Many insurance companies will offer you free safety training on certain things that you can take advantage of.

Allison Howell: And a lot of those things, like a fire inspection or OSHA inspection or insurance training, They sound a little bit scary. Those are things you don't want to have happen, but you're saying, those are actually preventative and are great resources to help you not end up in these situations that you don't want to be in.

Ann King: Exactly. And honestly, when you call OSHA in and you say, I want to do this the right way, can you show me how to do it? They love you for that. They understand that you're just trying to do things the right way. So it's not scary at all. It's very, very informative and helpful.



Allison Howell: What about organization? Did you organize the warehouse any differently than it was organized before?

Ann King: One thing we did invest in and actually it was a company that we found at Lend and Gather.

We hired Upright Labs to come in and give us a huge, I think they gave us a hundred and fifty page deck of how to reset the warehouse for primal efficiency and all that. So that was massive and a big investment, but totally worth it.

Allison Howell: What do you think are some key takeaways that you experienced from that?

Ann King: I think the biggest change is the overall flow. We always kind of put things that went out the closest, that just kind of naturally happened from season to season.

But the labeling, the organization that it comes in here and then it goes to cleaning restock, then it goes... so it's following almost like a train track. around the warehouse for efficiency and also, I'm really annoying with the words visual cues. Do we have visual cues? There's lots of visual cues of everything from safety. How you clean something, everything's labeled.

Allison Howell: Sounds like a dream.

Ann King: It really is. I'm very proud of that warehouse.

Allison Howell: Yeah, that's wonderful. Well, I want to hear a little bit more about your best rental investments.

When you think about your collection and the things that you are either most proud of or the things that have made you the most money or been most successful, what have been your best rental investments?

Ann King: Number one every year for the past 12 years has been the farm table. So we call it the R. C. Wood Farm Table. Those are the farm tables that were stamped with the address of where the wood came from in Cleveland. So that's always been our number one seller, always, even this season, which always blows my mind. I'm like, Oh my God, she's still going. So I love that piece. I love it because it's solid wood.

It's a high quality wood. The construction is amazing. I mean, obviously, it goes out, I don't know, 70, 100 times a season. It goes out tons.



piece and honestly our professionalism and our reputation with, it's getting delivered on time, it's going to be clean, it's going to look great.

Allison Howell: Tell me about maintenance, because you've talked a little bit about sanding down your tables and refinishing them, but it seems like you have a pretty high standard for what is rentable condition at Borrow. I feel like every rental company defines that term differently. Sets those expectations differently. How do you set those expectations for your client? What do they expect when their rentals show up at their event?

Ann King: Like new is what we say. And really the standard for us, in house it should look like you just bought it. If it has a stain, then it's not going up. If it has a massive nick, if it's not secure, then it's not going out. So really our standard is like new. We charge more. We make people pay for setup on every order. So they can't just do a drop. We're operating at almost a niche level. So the product needs to represent that.

Allison Howell: How do you communicate that with your staff? So they know, I mean, you said a major nick, how do you define the difference between a major nick and an acceptable nick?

Ann King: A major nick looks like something not repairable. If there's a question, there's constant communication chatter happening between the team. We use Slack and there's a Slack channel called damaged items.

So regardless of the damage, you're taking a picture of it. So if they're not sure, put a picture on slack and be like what should we do with this? And most of the nick pictures are from plates where it's either somebody can take that one home because we can't send it out.

Allison Howell: Especially with things with patina right because from an untrained eye somebody feels like why do we even have to take care of this? I'm just gonna throw it in the truck. No, that has exactly the right number of scratches and bumps and bruises.

How do you hold your team accountable for it? It sounds like you have these manager level or trainer level that you said are on slack and are constantly aware of it.

But how do you get them to care? How do you make sure that they are paying attention and not just saying like, ah, let's move on. Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter.

Ann King: That's a great question. We have a couple different systems in place and looking for damaged items is in every system that we have in the back of house.

Following that system the right way, everybody has their own scorecard. That scorecard determines raises and bonuses. It's all kind of ingrained with each other in their scorecards. And



Allison Howell: Mm hmm.

Ann King: Yeah.

Allison Howell: But it's presented at a meeting. So if they say, Oh yeah, I'm a 10 and you're like, Hmm, but not really, then do they have to change it there in front of you or what?

Ann King: We just go in and change it. We'll just be like, Hey guys, we marked this as a five. I don't know if you saw this, but you missed these two things.

The product manager is always assessing and kind of looking through things always. That's a huge part of our job.

Allison Howell: And what does that do for your culture?

Ann King: It's actually great. It's very open. Everything is so transparent. And very, very clear.

This is what I'm responsible for. This is my goal. If I hit my goal and I do well, I can get a promotion or make more money. You would think by all the scoring, it would be a bad culture, but it is totally not at all. It's very open.

Plus I feel like our managers are just awesome. They're more supportive than a talk down to you type thing.

What we always say is if you have something that you're consistently missing on, something's wrong. We know you care about it. So the system's wrong. There's a cog in the wheel somewhere. And these scorecards help us identify those cogs and hopefully fix them.

90 percent of the time, it's not the person. Because people want to do well, no one goes into work every day and is like, I want to screw up a bunch.

Allison Howell: Are these scorecards something you came up with yourself or is this something you read about or where did this come from?

Ann King: I'm really not that smart, everything good we are doing here I learned from somebody else.

I've worked with this consulting company for a while, they do teaming and with culture, hiring, etc. they helped me put this all together.



Also the constant. open communication is huge. And I'm not perfect. I still have days where I'm freaking out about something stupid. When I was younger, it was every single day I was freaking out about something, but no, I absolutely think you can have both.

And that comes with just being very clear about, what works and why. Explaining the why to people and empowering them to get behind it and really believe in it too and realize that the company's success is really their success and they're totally intertwined. So they have a huge piece in this pie.

Giving up a lot of control over a lot of areas of this business is also giving into the support of the people you work with, I feel like that is such an entrepreneurial thing to try to do everything by yourself, plow through it and not tell anybody else that you're having a complete and utter mental breakdown that day and you just go somewhere and cry by yourself. But realizing, Oh, these people I work with, I just don't have to be their support system.

They can also be some of mine. We can share this load a little bit. That has been unbelievably pivotal where I spent many years feeling like I couldn't lean on somebody else, but they all had to lean on me. And that was incredibly suffocating.

Allison Howell: Kind of the other side of that coin, I'm interested to know what characteristics do you feel you've always possessed that have contributed to your success?

Ann King: I think it really just breaks down to one thing. There's an awesome book called Grit and that's totally me. I have grit and I have a willingness and want to continue to grow and learn. That's always been innately in me and I'm an extremely hard worker. I love hard work. I really do. It makes me feel like my mind's in the right place or something.

Allison Howell: This is kind of tangential, but do you feel like you've been able to pass that on to your kids at all?

Ann King: Oh, God. Teenagers, Allison. Teenagers. I don't know what's wrong with them. No, I'm just kidding. Yes, both of them are incredibly hard workers.

My son is that kid in the garage, working out, my daughter is constantly doing things. They are innately their own little people. They're definitely not the exact same as me. We all we had a lazy Sunday. We did nothing all day. It felt good.

Allison Howell: I don't know if you feel mom guilt the way I feel mom guilt. But I think that it's really admirable for them to see you run a business and navigate challenges. Have you noticed them noticing you in that at all through the years?



Ann King: Yea they're always in a Borrow sweatshirt. Their friends all wear borrowed stuff. They're proud of mom. I feel like all of this has been good for them. They're not the superstars in the world. You know what I mean? It can't always be about them all the time, but it is about them a lot of the times too.

I don't know what's wrong with me, but I just did not have a lot of mom guilt. That sounds so terrible.

Allison Howell: No. There are so many days when I'm like, you know what, you need other influences in your life. It's important for you to look up to other grown ups and not just me.

I keep citing some study that I read about how chores are the thing that make you most successful in college. And then Tim, my husband keeps saying, you never read that study.

I told you about some interview I heard on NPR and I was like, okay, well, I might be making up a study, but I'm sure it's more important for my kids to do chores than for me to coddle them. So I'm going to keep saying it.

Ann King: My son did spend some time at Borrow last season and he got fired.

Mom came in and was working with him and I walked downstairs and he's on his phone and I'm like, Mom! She's like, Oh, I just let him do it. And I was like, forget this. He's too young. So back to mowing lawns.

Allison Howell: Obviously you learned a ton from the experience of the fire and the transformation that happened in that season.

Tell us about some of the milestones or moments in your business that you have truly celebrated. What are you most proud of?

Ann King: That check I wrote myself in year one did come true on year 10. So that was a big, big milestone. Even after the fire, that was a really big one. I feel like we do a lot of small celebrations.

We did a big event for the people that helped us after the fire. That was very cool and fun. A very intentional dinner and I wrote a poem for everybody and said it to everybody, it was really wonderful, but we do a lot of small things that I freaking love.

We just had the other day, a mental health break where we all got ice cream and sat on the couches and just took an hour to shoot the crap. We're taking a mental health moment or



employee appreciation lunches or go out for each other's birthdays all the time. Just really do a lot of small support things constantly.

Allison Howell: Well, it seems like for a company who's in business to help other people celebrate, it's important for you to celebrate too.

Ann King: We're all going to go out, I think tomorrow during the day and just spend a day working. I've got a little cottage on the lake and we're just going to work out of the cottage. Little things like that, you know.

Allison Howell: Great. Perfect. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Ann King: Thank you. Girlfriend.

A big thank you to Ann King of Borrow Curated Furniture + Design.

And a big thank you for listening to The Trunk Show brought to you by RW Elephant, mighty inventory management software designed to help you conquer the chaos in your event rental business and reclaim your creativity, because the world needs more of the beautiful events and environments you create.

We hope you enjoyed the show! We're releasing episodes every other week, so be sure to follow us on your favorite podcast app. As always, I'm your host, Alison Howell. Happy renting!



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