

A good piece of luggage is the unsung hero of travel—and something you only realize when things don't go quite as planned. A zipper breaks, a wheel pops off, a handle comes undone: every subsequent failing element ensures the subsequent deterioration of your sanity. Murphy's Law, as you might imagine, is particularly unpleasant when you're on the road.

When Jen Rubio and Stephanie Korey founded Away, a direct-to-consumer luggage company, the intention was to minimize potential headaches and maximize a carry-on's untapped potential, all while keeping costs down. The two, who met while working at exemplar D2C outfit Warby Parker, saw a large gap between cheap, poorly made offerings (read: your potential worst travel nightmare) and higher quality, extravagantly marked-up ones (read: paying a pretty penny for getting through the airport in one piece). In creating Away, Rubio and Korey aimed to disrupt an industry that was ripe for change.

The resulting product is a sleek, well-designed piece of luggage whose function rivals its looks. For just \$225, you'll get super-quiet Japanese wheels, a sleek polycarbonate hardshell, quality YKK zippers, and, to really seal the deal, a built-in battery so you can charge your phone instead of desperately searching for an outlet in the airport. They splurge on quality components and save by skipping the traditional retail model. A win/win.

Here, we talk to Jen Rubio about the importance of face-time, tips to a successful seed round, and her eureka moment in a Zurich airport.

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Where did the idea for Away come from?

Jen Rubio

It came from a personal need. I'm very, very focused on how brands and people interact. If you look at travel—it's this thing that a ton of people pay a lot of attention to: where they go, how they fly, what they wear, what they bring. That attention to detail stopped short of luggage. And that's because there's not a luggage brand out there that talks about the way we actually travel or that really wants to connect with people about their experiences. All the luggage brands out there exist to just talk about product and form and functionality. So I wanted to create something that was bigger than that.

When I started talking to my co-founder Steph about it, we realized that there was a great opportunity to cut out the middle man and go direct to consumer and be able to provide a ton of value by creating a really high-quality product and selling it for a more affordable price point. It's an industry where that value proposition still exists.



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When you and Steph came up with the idea were you still at Warby Parker?

Jen Rubio

No. Steph and I started at Warby in 2011 on the same day. I left in 2013 and moved to London. Steph left in 2014 to go to Columbia Business School. I was still in London and Steph was still at Columbia when we started talking about it a year ago this week, actually.

We were both doing very different things. After she finished business school, I moved back to New York full-time.

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What were you working on in London while you were there?

Jen Rubio

I was head of innovation at All Saints.

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So at what point did you decide to leave All Saints?

Jen Rubio

I had actually already left and I was doing a bit of soul searching and traveling. It was funny. This luggage concept was one of the things I'd been thinking about, and I was coming home from Davos and my luggage broke. I had the most terrible luggage shopping experience at Zurich Airport. I was like, This is unreal. I had never experienced a place where you could buy a \$500 or a \$40 bag and they'd be sold next to each other with no discernible difference. That was one of the eye-opening things about this industry that made me really want to investigate it more.

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What was the first thing you put your money into as a company and why?

Jen Rubio

We were very lucky. My background is in branding and creative. Steph's background is in product and supply chain and operations. Between us, we had a lot of things covered. We didn't have to go outside for a lot of those things for a long time. One of the first things we really invested in were working with an industrial designer to create our first product, and

then branding. It was important that we give ourselves a significant budget and a lot of time to nail the branding down.





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Did you hire an outside firm to do any of the logo or identity work?

Jen Rubio

We hired two contractors—a design team—to do our initial identity work. We loved working with them so much, and they loved what they had built so much, that they're now our full-time creative directors. I think that speaks to the four of us really working together on the brand and the designers being really proud of the work that they had done that they'd want to continue it.

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Did you have a working prototype when you started fundraising?

Jen Rubio

We didn't, which was definitely rare. We went out and fundraised pre-product, pre-launch. But I think investors were investing in the team and the idea and the knowledge we had acquired about the space.

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What was the process in manufacturing abroad and do you have any advice for businesses that are doing the same?

Jen Rubio

I was very lucky because Steph knows so much about it. But I think, whether you know a lot or a little, the most essential part is really going out there and seeing every factory for yourself, asking tons of questions, knowing what kinds of questions you're going to ask before you even set foot in the factory. Even with Steph's connections and background in manufacturing, there was so much due diligence that had to be done. I hear a lot of companies who think they can just source from whatever factory without interviewing or visiting them, and I always caution against that, because some of the ones that seemed the most promising ended up being the worst ones when we saw them in person.



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Do you have to maintain that relationship by going back frequently throughout the year?

Jen Rubio

Yeah. The thing is you don't have to, but we definitely take the time to. We work super close with our factories, we talk to them every day. We also try to keep them very aware and interested in what's going on with our company. Since we're a smaller company, we knew we weren't going to be their number one priority. We didn't have that relationship. Our factory makes a lot of luggage a lot of other high-end brands, and we're by far their smallest customer. So we really invested a lot of face-time with them to create a strong relationship and make sure that we're not going to run into any issues when we manufacture our product.

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Were the tech components a part of the concept from day one?

Jen Rubio

No, they weren't. We actually took a step back from a feature list and did a lot of consumer research and focus groups and surveys about the way people travel. Even in those surveys it wasn't like "Here's a list of features, which ones would you like?" It was more about trying to figure out people's behaviors and their pain points when they travel, and compiling those and then looking at it from a product angle. So, for instance, okay, one problem everyone has is their phone dies while they're traveling, how can we solve for that. That's how the battery charger feature got built in, and that's how we continue to approach product development—just thinking about how people travel and what they need and how we can build that into our luggage.

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How did you approach financing originally?

Jen Rubio

We raised a small friends and family round, and then we raised our VC round a few months after that.

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How did you determine how much money you would need to raise?

Jen Rubio

We just put together a plan of what we thought it would cost to properly do inventory and marketing and head count for the first couple of years, and then came up with a number based on that. We actually raised double the amount we set out to raise—the advice we got from every VC was to raise more money while we could. And it was important to have enough capital to make sure the launch had enough traction.



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If you were to do financing again, is there anything you would do differently?

Jen Rubio

I think having talked to so many people about their process really made us consider how we wanted to do it. What we decided to do was to take a set amount of time and focus only on fundraising. I mean, that's not a luxury that we would have even when we raise our next round since we have a team now. Because we set aside a dedicated amount of time and made it a structured process for ourselves—sending the decks, getting the intros, doing the follow-ups. I think that's why we were able to accomplish it so quickly. So I wouldn't change how we raised our seed funding.

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How does your love for travel impact the culture of the business?

Jen Rubio

I think the whole brand is the embodiment of what we all love about travel: the arrival, the exploration, the discovery of different places. You kind of see that manifest through the brand in a lot of different ways. Through the colors and textures we use in the brand—it obviously manifests itself in the product. Because everyone here is passionate about travel and really believes that everywhere in the world is accessible and worth being explored, I think that comes through in a lot of ways for the company?





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What is the most memorable adventure you've ever been on?

Jen Rubio

I went to Antarctica in 2010, and that was amazing. Specifically one night in Antarctica when we left the ship and went camping. A penguin broke into my tent. That was an incredible adventure. The last adventure I went on before starting Away-I went to Morocco by myself and did a road trip from Essaouira to the sand dunes in the Sahara Desert. And then came back and started working on Away full-time. That was amazing.

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What is your version of a travel nightmare?

Jen Rubio

Luggage with no wheels. I tried do it once-I got a really "trendy" bag. That was a nightmare. You don't understand how much it impacts your travel until you're lugging a bag up fourteen flights of stairs.

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Travel tip for the less experienced:

Jen Rubio

Four wheels is better than two.

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What's your dream destination?

Jen Rubio

Vietnam I haven't done yet, and I'm dying to go back to Kenya.

Quick Fire:

Favorite restaurant: Hudson Clearwater or Sweetgreen.

Favorite coffee shop: Two Hands

Best place to get a drink: Bowery Hotel

Favorite clothing store: Acne

Favorite mom-and-pop: Calliope in NY, Standard Goods in LA, and General Store in SF

Favorite direct-to-consumer brands other than Away: Outdoor Voices, HeyDay, and Glossier.