

KTUR: Rhinepreneurs

Summary Episode #1

Chapter 1: A brand new Podcast

Sandra kicks off the very first episode of the *Rheinpreneurs* podcast by introducing the series and its cross-border focus on start-ups in Germany, France, and Switzerland. Together with her guest, Rick Lindner, she explores the key question: "Without a network, no start-up?"

Rick shares how networking has always been a source of fun rather than a task for him. His passion for connecting people started during his university days when he joined a student entrepreneurship club. Over time, this passion naturally evolved into a professional network.

Rick then introduces *Pitchload*, the start-up he co-founded. Born from the frustration that start-up ecosystems were hard to navigate and lacked transparency, Pitchload aims to make access to these ecosystems easier. The platform serves as a digital meeting point for founders, investors, and other players, focusing on start-ups and their business activities, not just individuals.

Unlike typical social networks, Pitchload is designed to stay professional and business-oriented, steering clear of irrelevant content. Its ultimate goal is to enable meaningful, targeted networking within the start-up community.

Chapter 2: Why Networking is Essential for Founders

Sandra takes a step back to explore the core question: Why is networking so important for founders, even when time is limited? Rick explains that without a network, it's hard to find support. Investors are often hesitant about solo founders, and the start-up world thrives on interconnected communities. While networks are welcoming, entrepreneurs must actively engage to benefit from them.

He advises founders to start networking as early as possible – ideally during their studies – whether they plan to launch a start-up or join one later. Reflecting on his own journey, he acknowledges that his team may have founded Pitchload too early. A lack of experience led to costly mistakes, like unnecessary legal expenses. His key takeaway: Just start. Build something simple, talk to people, refine it, and let it grow naturally.

Sandra shifts the focus to how universities can support aspiring entrepreneurs. Rick emphasizes the importance of providing dedicated spaces and organizational structures. He highlights cross-university networks like START, which foster connections, organize events, and help founders find the right co-founders. His own entrepreneurial journey was shaped by such encounters, proving that strong networks often lead to successful collaborations.

Chapter 3: Networking for Introverts & The Role of Pitching

Sandra raises an important challenge: What about founders who are introverted and find networking difficult? Rick's advice is simple – just throw yourself into it. He reassures that start-up communities are welcoming, and networking doesn't have to mean public speaking or formal pitches. Simply attending events and being present often leads to natural conversations. The start-up ecosystem is built on mutual support, where people frequently ask, "How can I help you?"

The conversation then shifts to pitching. While Sandra emphasizes its importance in investor and business contexts, Rick sees it as a tool rather than a goal. He believes founders should develop their own pitch style and understand what they want to achieve – whether it's gaining customers, attracting investors, or simply raising awareness.

Rick also warns against the trend of "pitching for the sake of pitching." Many start-ups get caught up in endless accelerator programs and competitions instead of focusing on actual sales. He stresses that while these programs can be valuable, founders must eventually transition from refining their pitch to actually selling their product. In the end, a well-crafted *sales pitch* is often more crucial than a perfectly rehearsed investor pitch.

Chapter 4: LinkedIn, Networking Strategies & Making the Most of Events

Sandra and Rick discuss the importance of LinkedIn for entrepreneurs and effective networking strategies at events. Sandra asks whether being active on LinkedIn is truly necessary, and Rick's answer is a clear yes. He advises founders to start early, as LinkedIn has become the leading platform for professional networking. While he still values business cards for personal connections, LinkedIn enables quick and lasting exchanges. However, he sees a gap: While LinkedIn focuses heavily on personal branding, it does not efficiently connect companies with potential customers.

Beyond online networking, Rick emphasizes the importance of attending events. He participates in around five per month, distinguishing between large conferences like Slush and VivaTech, which are useful mainly for side events, and smaller local meetups, which often foster deeper, more valuable connections. His advice for newcomers is to leverage student tickets or startup initiatives like KIT Gründerschmiede to gain access to industry gatherings.

Above all, he stresses that networking is not about simply collecting business cards but about forming genuine relationships. He follows a simple rule: "Make at least three meaningful new connections at every event." Rather than focusing on job titles or business opportunities from the start, he believes in getting to know the person first. If a follow-up meeting happens, the event was a success. With this mindset, networking becomes less about obligation and more about building long-term connections that truly matter.

Chapter 5: Networks, Networks and more Networks

Sandra highlights Rick's impressive role – not just as a founder of his own startup but just recently also as part of the KIT-Gründerschmiede team, where he helps build and expand the deep tech hub network. She asks him how networks like these can genuinely support female founders and what kind of offerings truly make a difference.

Rick's response? He says the best thing startup centers can do is hire people who've already been in the startup scene themselves. People who have strong networks and are intrinsically motivated to help others succeed. He points out that in places like Mannheim and Heidelberg, it's so much easier to bring ideas to life because of the connections already in place. The challenge, though, is that Baden-Württemberg doesn't have a central hub like Munich or Berlin. But that's okay – it's still packed with innovation. The key is just figuring out how to pull all those talented people together.

Sandra follows up, asking whether bringing these synergies together is really that simple. Rick agrees it's not easy. Politically, it's tough, but operationally, it's possible. He explains that Baden-Württemberg is full of smaller hubs, and while a lot of great things are happening, there isn't really a "central" place where all these people can meet. Even with major events like the Start-Up BW Summit or the START Summit, it's still the same familiar faces you see over and over again.

Rick also touches on the issue of networks cannibalizing each other's efforts. While it's true there are lots of overlapping offers, he feels that it's important for every region to have its own network. But the real challenge is figuring out how to combine all these efforts in a way that makes sense.

As for practical advice for young founders, Rick says it's all about getting out there, talking to people, and seeing where things go. You don't always have to push your own agenda – sometimes just asking others what they're doing can lead to opportunities. A casual approach, like creating a small event or setting up a WhatsApp group, can go a long way.

Sandra wraps up the conversation by emphasizing the importance of being open, relaxed, and willing to network. Rick agrees and adds that it's not about having everything figured out. The key is to get out there, meet new people, and be open to what comes next.

Chapter 6: Building Meaningful Connections

Sandra brings the episode to a close with a series of quick-fire questions, asking Rick to share brief answers. The first question is if there was a contact that truly changed his life as a founder. Rick answers that there wasn't just one person, but rather a chain of connections, each leading to the next. He points out that his real breakthrough came when his team applied for the scout program at APX, which he considers a major turning point.

Sandra then asks about mentors. Rick admits that he didn't have a mentor early on, and that's something he regrets. He suggests that founders should seek out mentors sooner, as they can be incredibly valuable for challenging ideas and providing guidance.

Next, Sandra asks about his preferred method for networking – digital or face-to-face. Rick prefers in-person networking first, followed by digital connections, and then more face-to-face interactions. He emphasizes that following up on contacts is crucial, and he often checks in with people just to stay in touch and offer help when needed.

When asked whether quantity or quality of contacts is more important, Rick leans heavily toward quality. While he used to only accept connections on LinkedIn from people he knew, he acknowledges that if you're aiming for wider reach, you might need to adjust that approach. Still, he believes maintaining a healthy balance is key, with quality always being the priority.

Finally, Sandra brings up the topic of today's show: "No startup without a network." Rick agrees completely, emphasizing that while a startup can function without one, networking is critical for many aspects of success.

Sandra wraps things up by thanking Rick for being the first guest on their new series, Rhinepreneurs, brought to you by KTUR and cofounded by Interreg Oberrhein.